Kino no Tabi Volume11

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Kino_no_Tabi:Volume11

These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 11

キノの旅（たび）XI

the Beautiful World

ある春の日。山からの冷たい雪解け水が、森の緑に活力を与え始める頃——。
朝の日を背に受けて、キノとエルメスは、とある国を見下ろす山の上にいました。あとはもう道を下っていくと、そこにある森に囲まれた広い城壁の中へと、城門へとたどり着く場所でしたが、「こりゃ入れないね、キノ」エルメスとキノは、そこから動こうとしません。見えるのは、国内のあちこちで上がっている火の手でした。たくさんの家が燃えています。風に乗って、薄く煙が、そして人間の悲鳴が聞こえました。（「お花畑の国」）他——
全11話収録。
そして、今回の“あとがき”は……⁇

キノの旅

—the Beautiful World—

XI

時雨沢恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

電撃文庫

し-8-23

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the Beautiful World

時雨沢恵一

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とても見つけやすいあとがき　—Preface—

ここです！　今回のあとがきはここですよ！　本の中にはありません。カバーの裏にもありません。今回はここです！　ここですよ！　なんて書くと「ホントは別のところにもあるんじゃないか？」と訝る人がいそうですが、キノも11冊も書いてしまうと、あとがきのネタがいよいよそろそろ——。

さて、『キノの旅』もとうとう11巻目です。途中『リリアとトレイズ』という別仕事や『学園キノ2』という問題作を挟んで、1年ぶりのご無沙汰でした。

こうして続巻が出せるのは待ってくれる読者の皆様、つまりはコレを読んでいるあなたのおかげです。作者だけがいくら頑張ってもダメなんです。皆様、本当にありがとうございました。

時雨沢恵一

明らかに浮いている筆者

しぐさわけいいち
時雨沢恵一

日本国出身のライトノベル作家。読者の皆さんからは
(　　　　)と思われていて、インターネットなどでは
(　　　　)と書かれることが多い。だが実際のところ
(　　　　)が本質。それ以上でもそれ以下でもない。
注・空欄はお好きな言葉をお入れください。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ～XI　the Beautiful World
学園キノ
学園キノ②
アリソン
アリソンⅡ　真昼の夜の夢
アリソンⅢ〈上〉　ルトニを車窓から
アリソンⅢ〈下〉　陰謀という名の列車
リリアとトレイズⅠ・Ⅱ　そして二人は旅行に行った〈上〉〈下〉
リリアとトレイズⅢ・Ⅳ　そして二人は旅行に行った〈上〉〈下〉
リリアとトレイズⅤ・Ⅵ　私の王子様〈上〉〈下〉

くろほしこうはく
イラスト：黒星紅白

福岡在住猫好きイラストレーター。飯塚武史名義でプレイステーション2「サモンナイト」シリーズキャラクターデザインを手がけてます。今年の目標は発売日に買ったゲームを廉価版が出る前にクリアする事。

カバー／旭印刷

キノの旅 XI

the Beautiful World

Kino's Travels

時雨沢恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

「お花畑の国」

—Flower Arrangement—

ある春の日。

山からの冷たい雪解け水が、森の緑に活力を与え始める頃。

朝の日を背に受けて、キノとエルメスは、とある国を見下ろす山の上にいました。

あとはもう道を下っていくと、そこにある森に囲まれた広い城壁の中へと、城門へとたどり着く場所でしたが、

「こりゃ入れないね、キノ」

エルメスとキノは、そこから動こうとしません。

見えるのは、国内のあちこちで上がっている火の手でした。たくさんの家が燃えています。風に乗って、薄く煙が、そして人間の悲鳴が聞こえました。

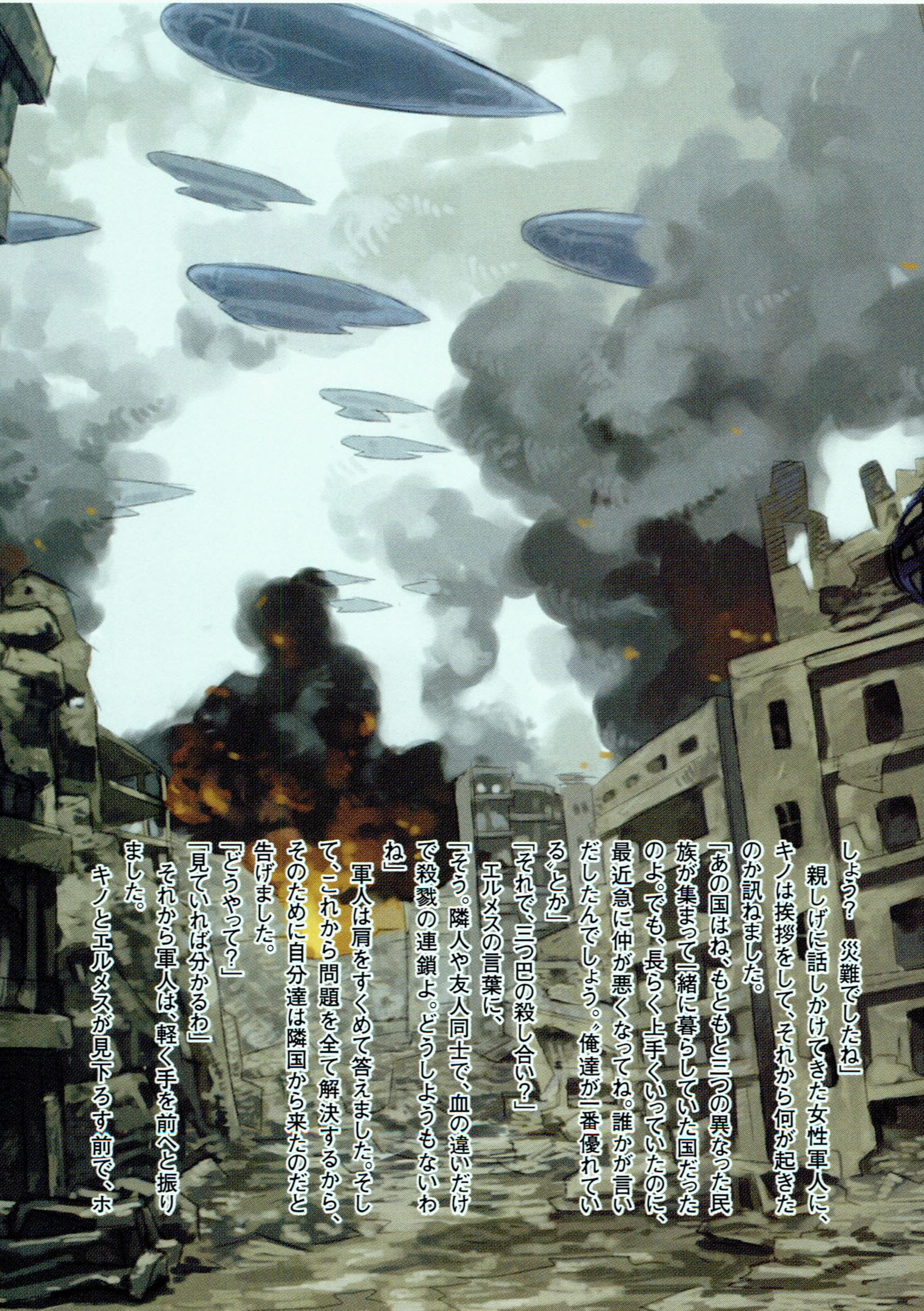
キノがスコープで覗くと、人々が殺し合っているのがよく見えました。狭い国内で、たくさんの人がたくさんの人を、殴ったり切ったり、時に撃ったりしながら、朝のお日様と蒼い空の下で、延々と殺し合っています。

キノとエルメスがお茶を飲んでしばし待っていると、頭の上を何かが通り過ぎました。

それは、ホヴィー（注・ホヴァー・ヴィークル。浮遊車両のこと）の群でした。列を組んで音もなく飛んできたホヴィーの群が国へと向かい、一台がキノ達の脇に降りてきました。

そこから降り立ったのは、中年の女性でした。若いお供を連れ、立派な軍服を着ています。つけた階級章は、なんだか偉そうです。

「やあ、旅人さんとモトラドさん。あの国に入国しようとしてここまで来たので



しょう？　災難でしたね」

親しげに話しかけてきた女性軍人に、キノは挨拶をして、それから何が起きたのか訊ねました。

「あの国はね、もともと三つの異なった民族が集まって一緒に暮らしていた国だったのよ。でも、長らく上手くいっていたのに、最近急に仲が悪くなってね。誰かが言いだしたんでしょう。〝俺達が一番優れている〟とか」

「それで、三つ巴の殺し合い？」

エルメスの言葉に、

「そう。隣人や友人同士で、血の違いだけで殺戮の連鎖よ。どうしようもないわね」

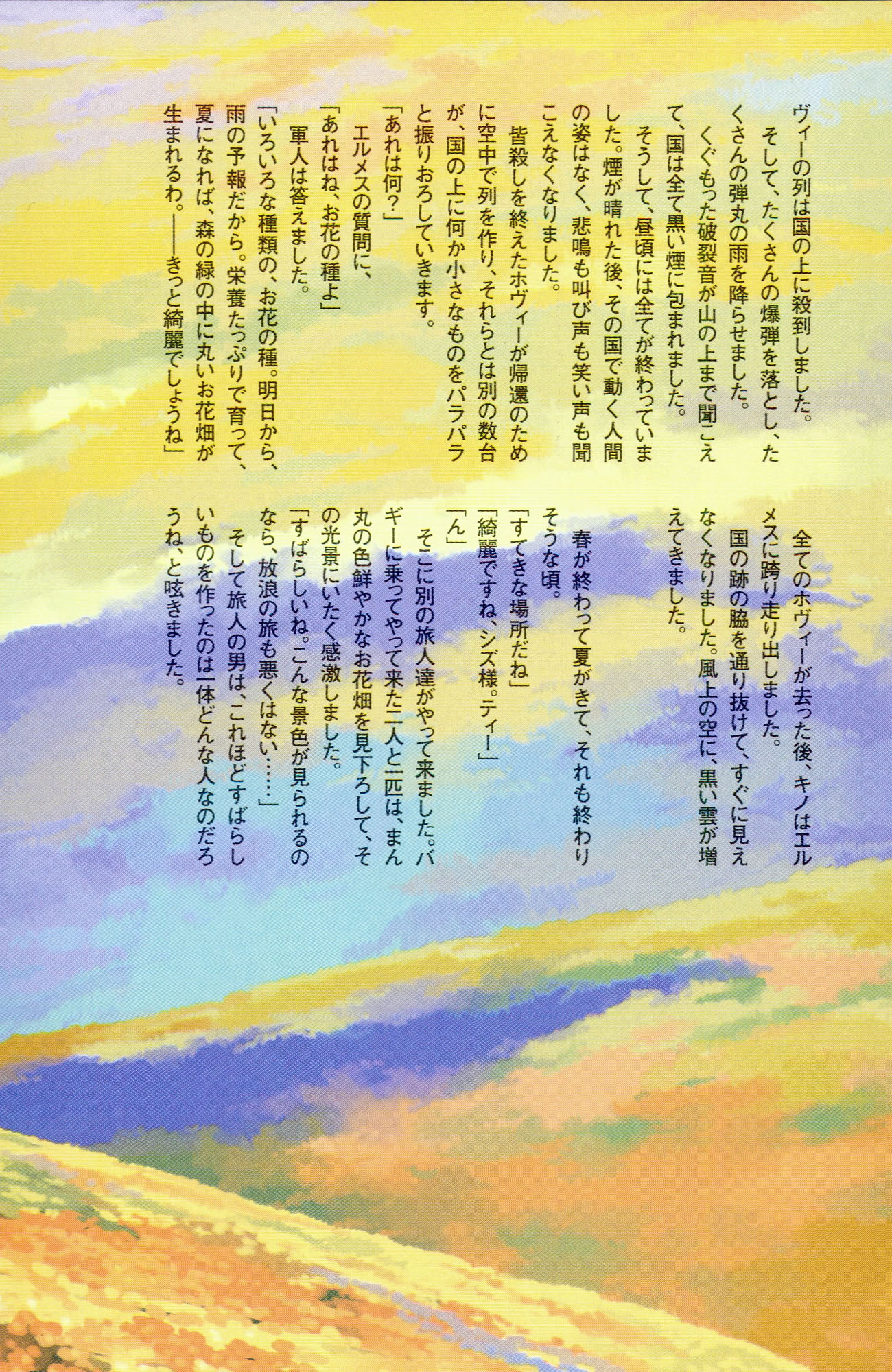
軍人は肩をすくめて答えました。そして、これから問題を全て解決するから、そのために自分達は隣国から来たのだと告げました。

「どうやって？」

「見ていれば分かるわ」

それから軍人は、軽く手を前へと振りました。

キノとエルメスが見下ろす前で、ホ



ヴィーの列は国の上に殺到しました。

　そして、たくさんの爆弾を落とし、たくさんの弾丸の雨を降らせました。

　くぐもった破裂音が山の上まで聞こえて、国は全て黒い煙に包まれました。

　そうして、昼頃には全てが終わっていました。煙が晴れた後、その国で動く人間の姿はなく、悲鳴も叫び声も笑い声も聞こえなくなりました。

　皆殺しを終えたホヴィーが帰還のために空中で列を作り、それらとは別の数台が、国の上に何か小さなものをパラパラと振りおろしていきます。

「あれは何？」

　エルメスの質問に、

「あれはね、お花の種よ」

　軍人は答えました。

「いろいろな種類の、お花の種。明日から、雨の予報だから。栄養たっぷりで育って、夏になれば、森の緑の中に丸いお花畑が生まれるわ。――きっと綺麗でしょうね」

　全てのホヴィーが去った後、キノはエルメスに跨り走り出しました。

　国の跡の脇を通り抜けて、すぐに見えなくなりました。風上の空に、黒い雲が増えてきました。

　春が終わって夏がきて、それも終わりそうな頃。

「すてきな場所だね」

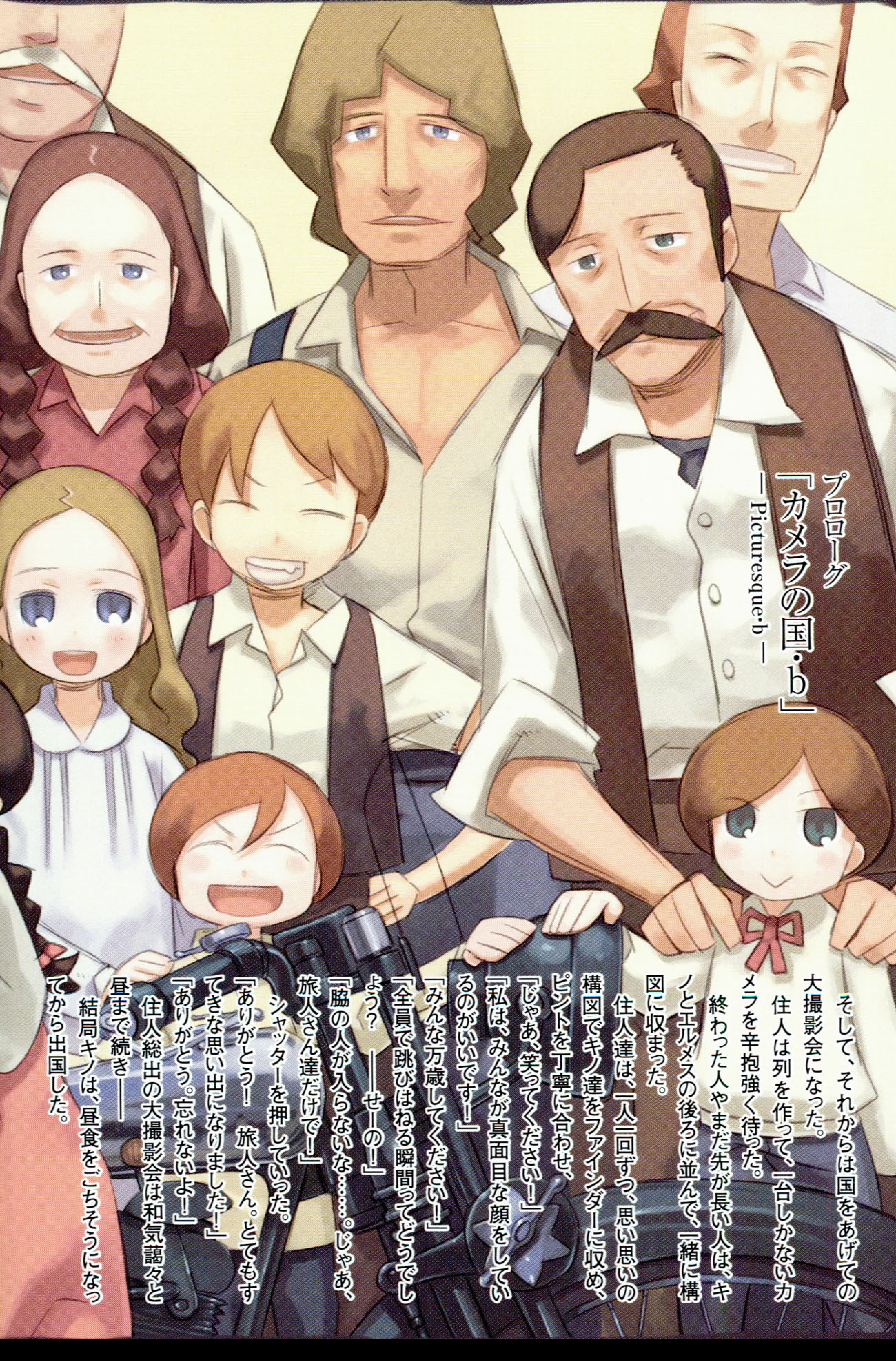
「綺麗ですね、シズ様。ティー」

「ん」

　そこに別の旅人達がやって来ました。バギーに乗ってやって来た二人と一匹は、まん丸の色鮮やかなお花畑を見下ろして、その光景にいたく感激しました。

「すばらしいね。こんな景色が見られるのなら、放浪の旅も悪くはない……」

　そして旅人の男は、これほどすばらしいものを作ったのは一体どんな人なのだろうね、と呟きました。



プロローグ

「カメラの国・b」

—Picturesque·b—

そして、それからは国をあげての大撮影会になった。

住人は列を作って、一台しかないカメラを辛抱強く待った。

終わった人やまだ先が長い人は、キノとエルメスの後ろに並んで、一緒に構図に収まった。

住人達は、一人一回ずつ、思い思いの構図でキノ達をファインダーに収め、ピントを丁寧に合わせ、

「じゃあ、笑ってください！」

「私は、みんなが真面目な顔をしているのがいいです！」

「みんな万歳してください！」

「全員で跳びはねる瞬間ってどうでしよう？　——せーの！」

「脇の人が入らないな……。じゃあ、旅人さん達だけで！」

シャッターを押していった。

「ありがとう！　旅人さん。とてもすてきな思い出になりました！」

「ありがとう。忘れないよ！」

住人総出の大撮影会は和気藹々と昼まで続き——

結局キノは、昼食をごちそうになってから出国した。

CONTENTS

口絵
「子供の国」
— Burn Up —

口絵
「お花畑の国」
— Flower Arrangement —

口絵 プロローグ
「カメラの国・b」
— Picturesque・b —

16 第一話
「つながっている国」
— Stand Alone —

52 第二話
「失望の国」
— Hope Against Hope —

58 第三話
「アジン（略）の国」
— With You —

100 第四話
「国境のない国」
— Asylum —

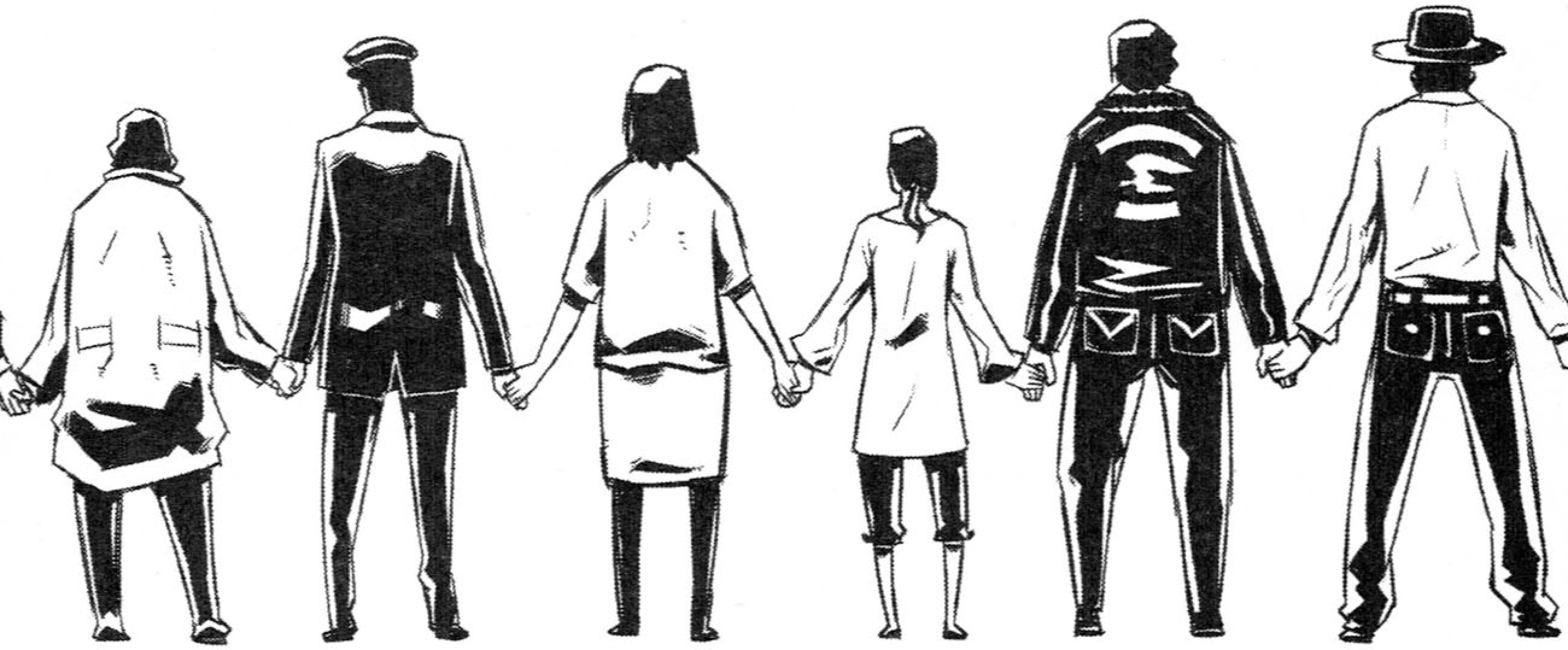
118 第五話
「学校の国」
— Assignment —

148 第六話
「道の話」
— Passage —

178 第七話
「戦う人達の話」
— Reasonable —

252 エピローグ
「カメラの国・a」
— Picturesque・a —

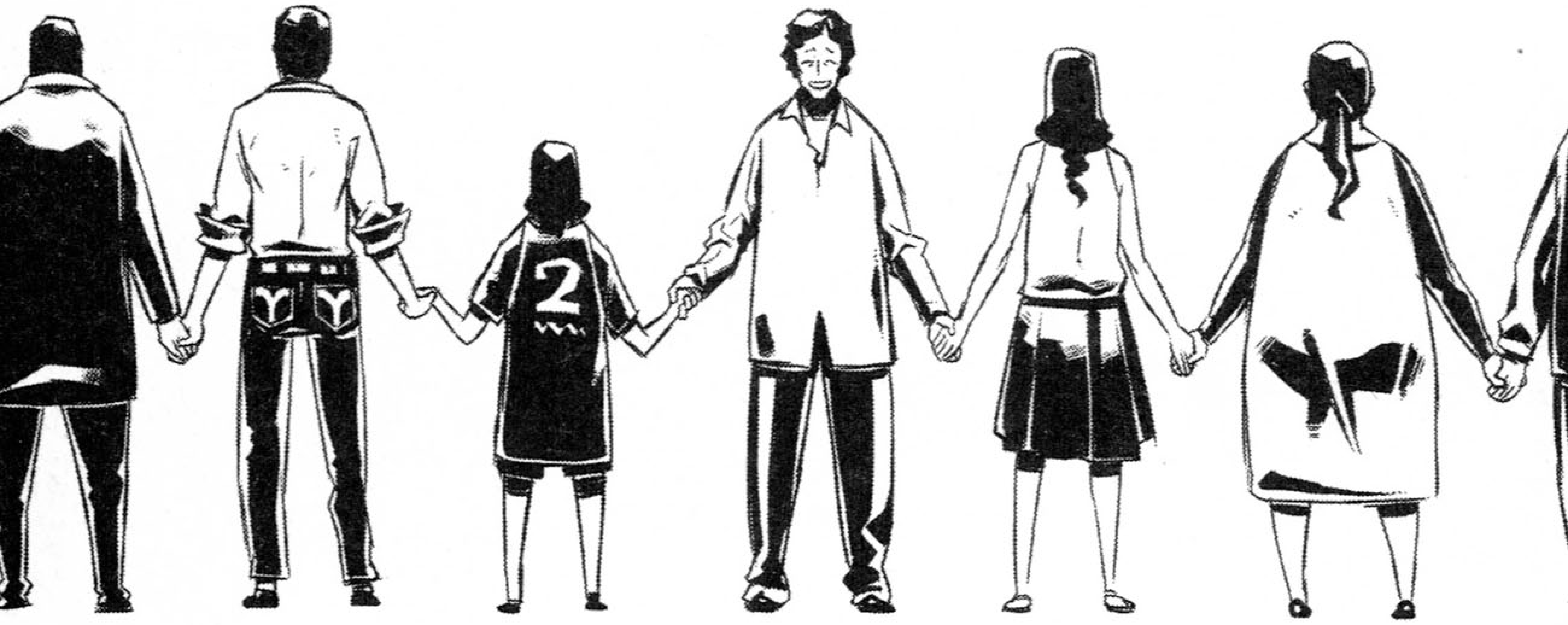
Design Yoshihiko Kamabe



第一話

「つながっている国」

―Stand Alone―



第二話

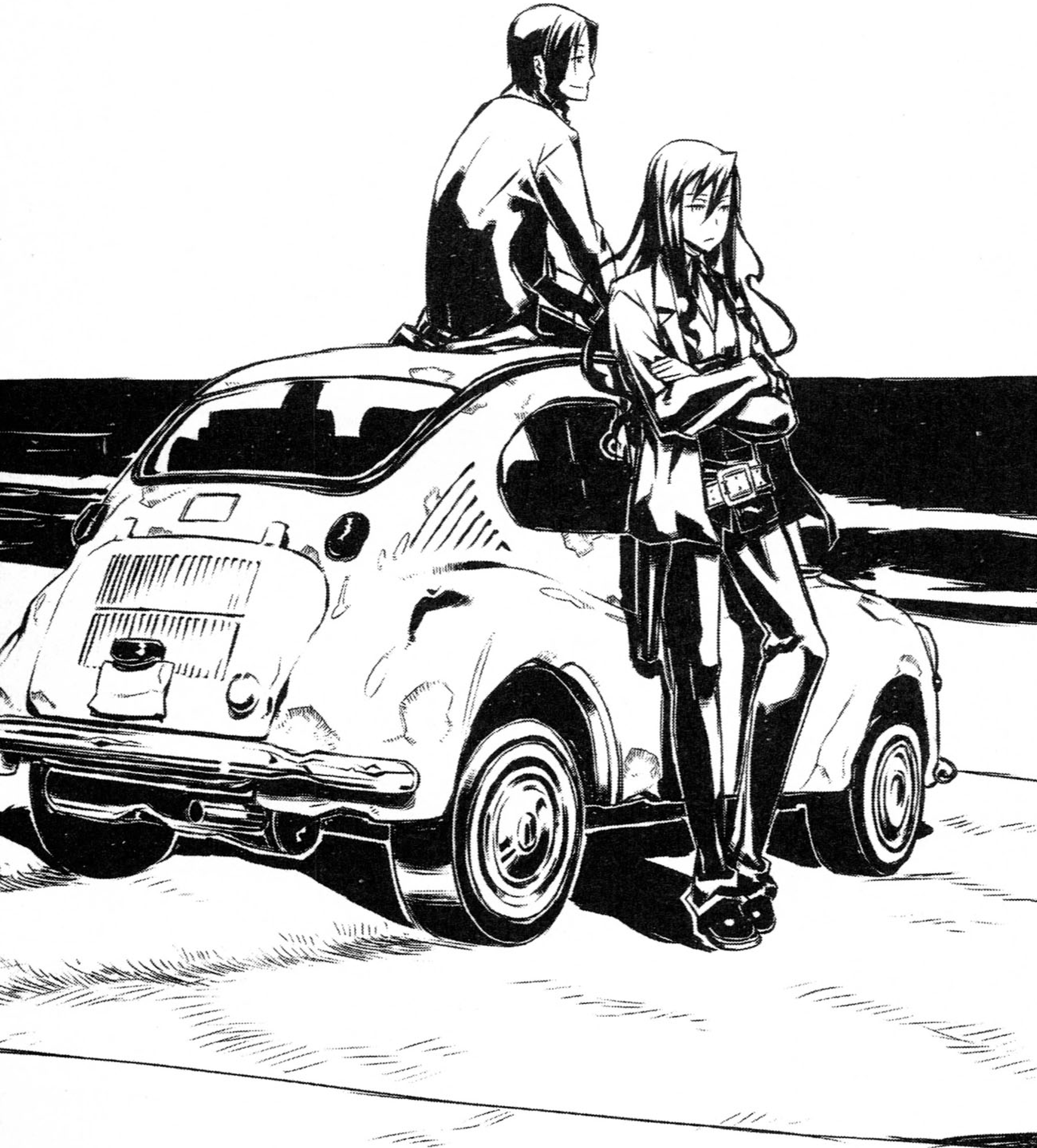
「失望の国」

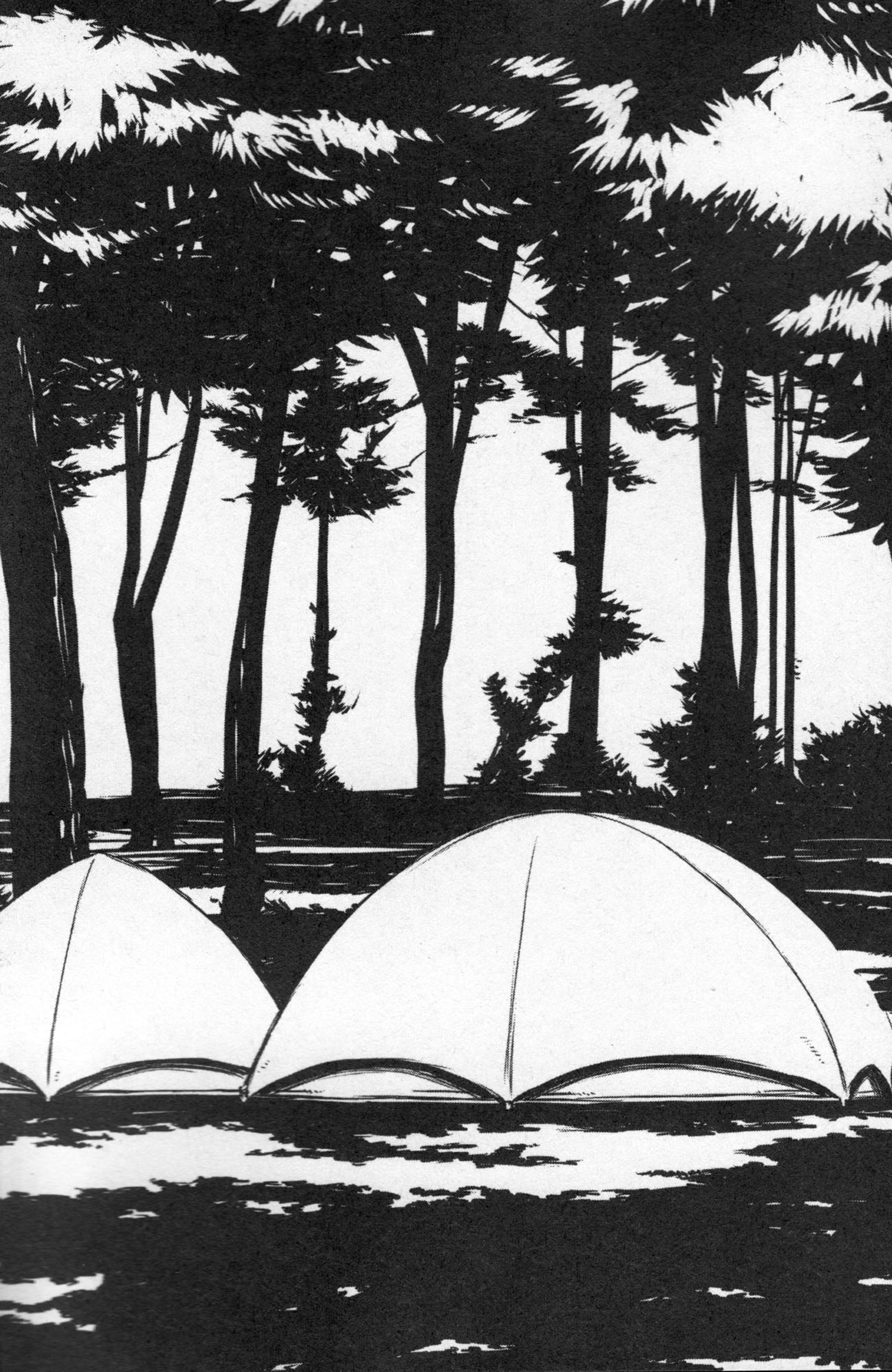
— Hope Against Hope —

第三話

「アジン（略）の国」

―With You―

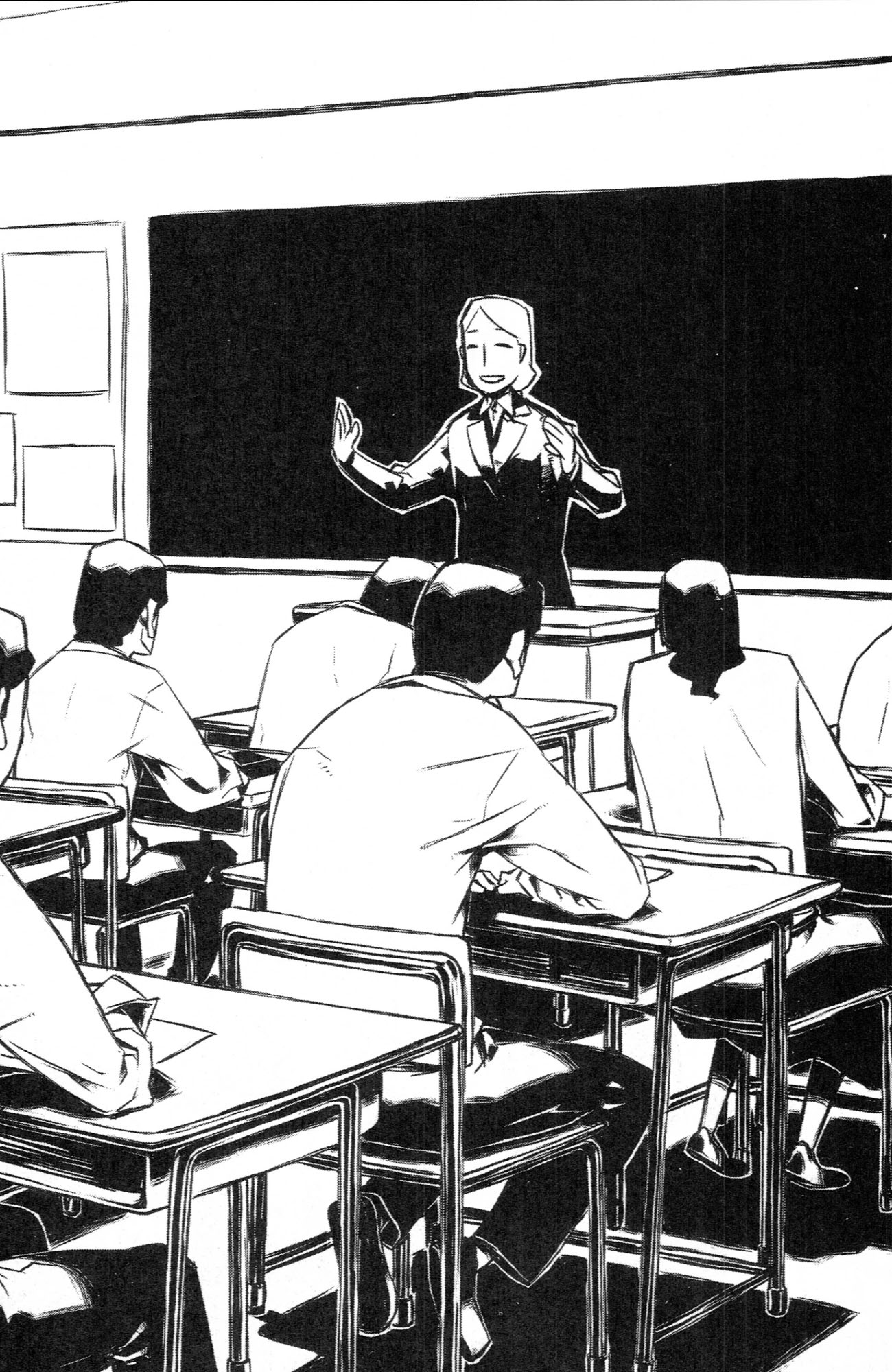




第四話

「国境のない国」

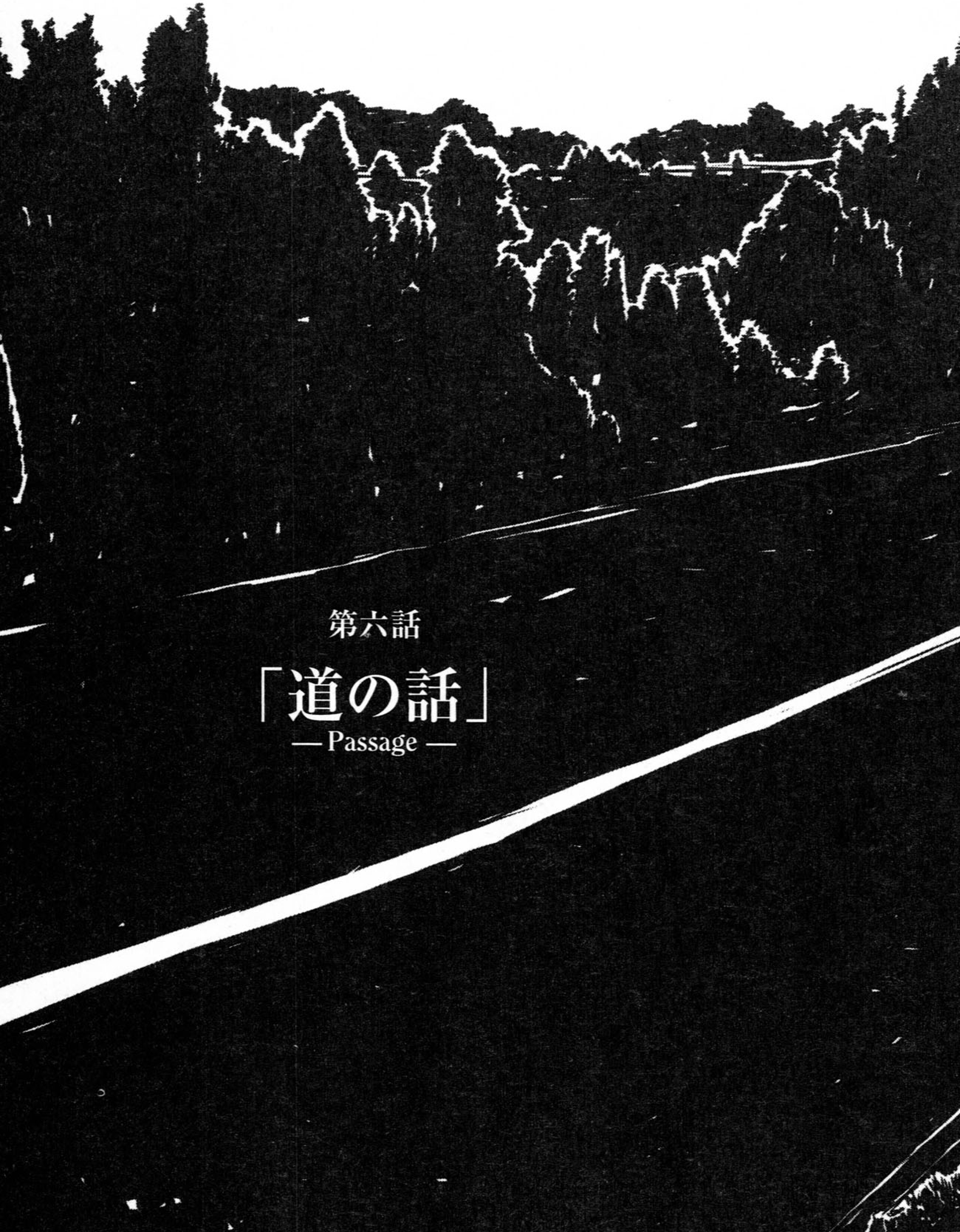
—Asylum—



第五話

「学校の国」

— Assignment —



第六話

「道の話」

—Passage—

第七話

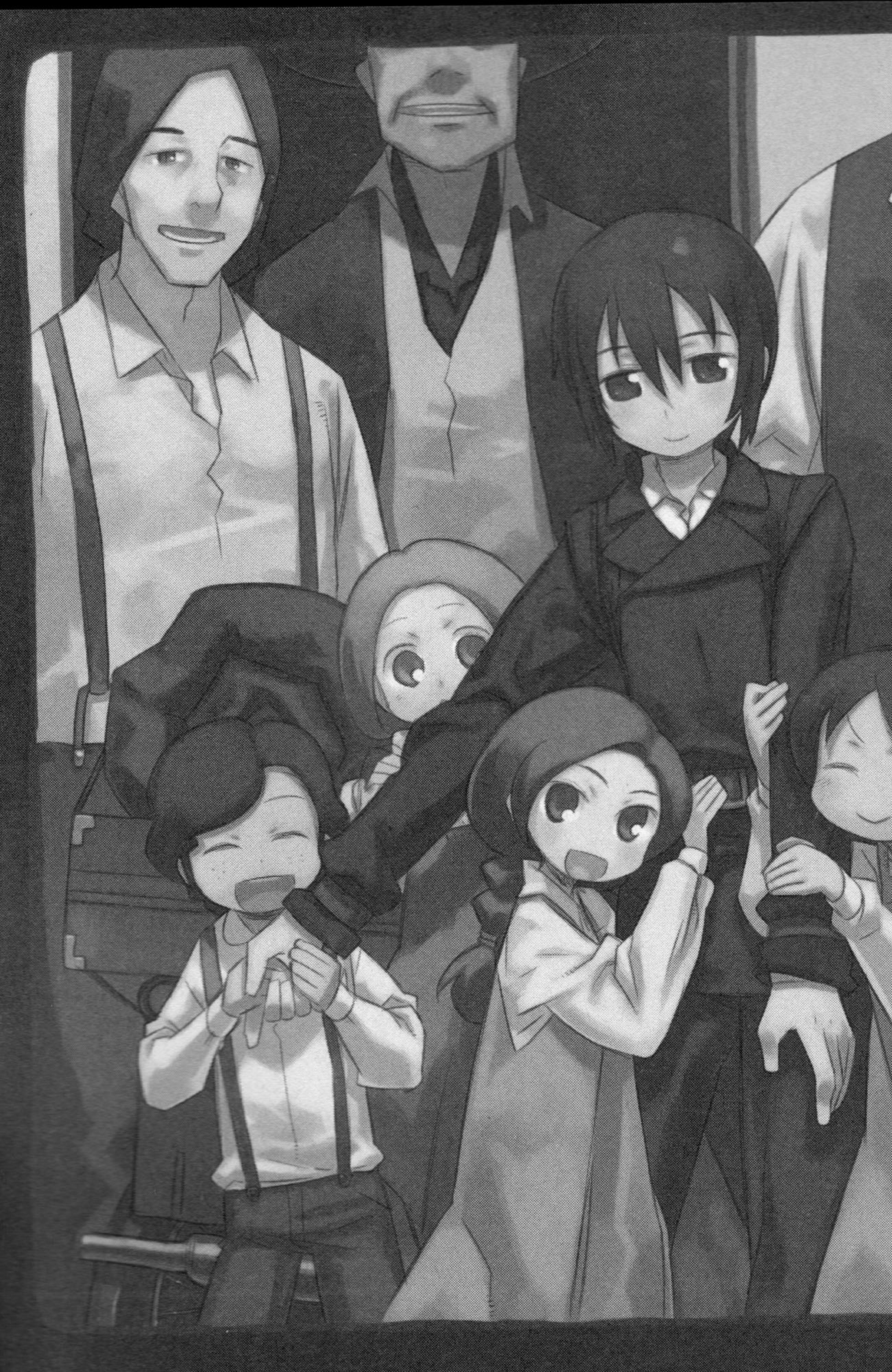
「戦う人達の話」

— Reasonable —

エピローグ

「カメラの国・a」

—Picturesque・a—



“The Land of Children” —Burn Up—

「子供の国」 ―Burn Up―

ある、とてもとても寒い時期。

キノと名乗る旅人が、エルメスと名づけられたモトラドに乗って、とある国にやって来ました。

キノとエルメスがその国で一番大きな公園に行くと、盛大なたき火がありました。

多くの大人達が集まって、次から次へと、いろいろなものを投げ込んでいます。

よく見ると、それはテレビに繋げてゲームができる機械だったり、漫画だけが載った本だったり、集めて楽しむカードゲームだったりしました。

投げ込む大人達を、

「…………」

子供達が、××××な目で見ていました。

手袋を外ししばらく暖まったキノは、投げ疲れて休んでいる一人の大人に話しかけました。何をやっているのですか、と。

大人は答えました。

「最近、子供達が悪くなってしまった。それは、私達が子供の頃になかったあれらの影響だった。だから、全て取り上げて処分しているんだよ。これによって私達の子供達は、私達が子供の頃そうだったように、純心で素直な、子供らしい子供に戻れるんだ」

延々とたき火が続き、すっかり暖まったキノが出発しようとした時のことです。

大人達が子ども達を引き連れてやって来て、キノ達の前に子供をずらりと並ばせました。五、六歳くらいに見える、小さな子供達でした。

幼稚園の先生だと名乗った大人達は、

「旅人さんにモトラドさん。せっかくだから、子供達と話をしてくれないかな？　外の人との交流は、いい経験になると思うんだ」

キノはひとまず承諾しました。

「さあ、旅人さんになんでも質問してみなさい」

そう大人達が言いました。子供達が、××××な表情のまま黙っていると、誰かいないのかい？　との声。

「どんなことを？」

子供の一人がそんなことを聞いて、

「どんなことでもいいんだよ。君が本当に思っていることを訊ねてみなさい。この国の大人の人には聞けないことなんてどうだい？」

大人が答えました。

じゃあ、と前置きして、その子供は、キノを見上げて、その瞳を真っ直ぐに見つめました。

「たびびとさん。どうかおしえてください――」

真摯な態度で、その子供は、キノに訊ねました。

「このくにのおとなをぜんいんもやすにはどうすればいいんですか？」

子供達全員がキノの前から消えて――

再び大人達に連れられて戻ってきました。

キノの前にずらりと並んだ子供達の中に、先ほど質問した子供はいませんでした。

During a very, very, very cold season.

A traveler named Kino and a motorad named Hermes entered a country.

When they entered the largest park it had to offer, they witnessed a great bonfire.

A great number of adults were present, each one throwing various items into the fire.

Upon closer inspection, they were televisions connected to devices that allowed gaming, a book that only had comics in it, and collectible card games were thrown in, too.

Towards these adults,

“…….”

Children gazed at them with xxxxx eyes.

Kino, who had taken off her gloves and took her time warming herself up, asked an adult who was taking a break nearby, tired from carrying all those things. Asked, what are you doing.

The adult replied.

“Kids have been getting worse recently. It’s because of the influence from things that weren’t around when we were kids. So we’re taking them up and disposing them. From now on, our kids will go back to how we were as kids. Pure and honest, as kids should be.”

The bonfire blazed on and on, and a thoroughly warmed up Kino was about to leave when something happened.

Adults came to drag the children back, and forced them to line up in front of Kino. They were small things, perhaps five or six years old.

The adults called kindergarten teachers said,

“Traveler and motorad. Since we don’t get this opportunity often, may the children speak to you? We think contact from the outside would be a good experience for them.”

Kino presently assented.

“Come now, ask the traveler anything you want to know.”

That was what the adult said. Still wearing the same silent xxxxx expressions as before, the adult said, Is there anybody?

“What kind of things?”

That was what one child asked.

“Why, anything. Ask anything that’s on your mind right now. How about things we adults wouldn’t ask?”

That was how the adult replied.

Okay, prefaced the child, gazing up into Kino’s eyes intensely.

“Miss Traveler. Can you please tell us—”

In the most earnest manner, the child asked this.

“How do we burn up all the grown-ups in this country ?”

All the children disappeared before Kino—

They were sent back by the adults.

In the group of children who were dragged before Kino, the one who asked the question was gone.

The Country of Flower Fields —Flower Arrangement—

One spring day.

When run-off water from the melting mountain snow were beginning to bestow energy upon the green of the forest.

With the morning sun upon their backs, Kino and Hermes looked down upon a country on the peak of the mountain.

All they had to do was roll down the road, cut through a certain forest enclosed in high walls, and then just get to the gate,

“Doesn’t look like we can get in, can we, Kino?”

But Kino and Hermes did not move from their spot.

From where they could see, points of fire bloomed here and there from several houses. Faint wisps of smoke and the cries of humans were aloft in the breeze.

Kino pulled out her telescope and gained a clear sight of people killing each other. In the cramped interior of the country, many people were hitting, slicing, sometimes shooting many other people. They killed each other without end beneath the morning sun and the blue sky.

Kino and Hermes bided their time by sipping tea, and then something moved over their heads.

It was a flight of Hovees (note: a Hover Vehicle; denotes a floating vehicle). In formation, they flew without a sound to the heart of the country but for one that landed beside Kino and Hermes.

A middle-aged woman stepped off. A young companion was with her and she wore a splendid military outfit. The rank insignia signified her to be a great person indeed.

“Hey, traveler and motorad. You were thinking of visiting this country and came this far, right? What a disaster, isn’t it.”

Kino greeted her, then inquired as to what was going on.

“That country, you see, was really a mash-up of three different ethnicities living together. They got along with each other pretty well, actually, but recently relations started getting bad. Someone spoke first. ‘We’re the best ones,’ or something.”

“So, three-way struggle, then?”

In reply to Hermes,

“Yep. It’s been a chain of massacres, neighbors and friends alike, all over a difference of blood. Can’t be helped.”

So said the soldier, shrugging. Then relayed to them, " Everything’s going to be resolved in due time, so we came from the neighboring country."

“How’s it going to end?”

“See for yourself.”

And the soldier casually waved her hand to the front.

The squad of Hovees poured over where Kino and Hermes looked down upon the country.

Then, they let fall many bombs, let rain a shower of shells.

The muffled cacophony of the explosions could be heard from the mountain peak as the country was enveloped in black smoke.

In this way, everything was over by noon. After the smoke cleared, there was no sight of a human, no shrieks nor screams nor laughter.

Done annihilating, the Hovees regrouped together in the sky, and a different assemblage swung downward. Something small pattered beneath them.

“What’s that?”

To Hermes’s question,

“Those, you see, are flower seeds.”

So said the soldier.

“Flower seeds of many, many kinds. Since after all, it’s due to rain starting tomorrow. Here, they’ll grow on plenty of nourishment, and by the time it’s summer, it will flourish into a round field of flowers. —It will be beautiful. I’m sure.”

After every Hovee departed, Kino mounted Hermes and sped away.

Spring ended and summer began, and around the time it was about to end.

“It’s a fantastic place.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it, Lord Shizu? Tea?”

“Mm.”

A different group of travelers arrived. Two people and one animal arrived in a buggy and looked down on the perfectly round, brilliant field of flowers, deeply impressed by this scenery.

“It’s wonderful. Life as a vagabond mustn’t be so bad if we get to see this often.”

And then the male traveler muttered to himself, I wonder who could have made something so splendid as this.

“The Camera Country, Part B” —Picturesque B—

And then it turned into a big photo session for the country.

The residents all lined up and waited to use that one camera with great patience.

Both the people who had their turns and those who did not gathered behind Kino and Hermes and settled themselves into some sort of composition.

The residents, one by one, one shot per person, framed Kino and Hermes however way they pleased with the finder, fine-tuned the focus,

“Now, say cheese!”

“I’d rather everyone put on a serious face!”

“Come on everyone, do a big cheer for me!”

“How about if everyone jumped up at once? —One! Two!”

“I can’t get the people at the side…okay! How about just the travelers!”

They pressed the shutter.

“Thank you, traveler! These will make splendid memories for us!”

“Thank you. I’ll never forget this!”

And so the country-wide photo session went on to noon.

In the end, Kino had the pleasure of lunching with them as well before she headed out.

Connected Land -Stand Alone-

Through the winter raced a motorad (note: a two-wheeled vehicle, meaning it doesn't fly).

It was a vast expanse of clustered rocky mountains, with not a blade of grass. The road weaved its way through these mountains and gently sloped down the hills, meandering to who-knows-where.

The motorad sped down the road, so packed as if it were frozen. Boxes lay on both sides of its back wheel, and on top, a bag. And strapped on top of that, a sleeping bag, water, and fuel cans.

The sky was a clear blue. The round sun faintly glimmered at a low point in the north. It was the afternoon, drawing near to evening. The air everywhere was chilly, everywhere dry.

“Man, it’s cold…”

The motorad’s driver complained.

The driver was wearing thick, green clothes from head to foot in order to keep out the cold, and near the stomach, in its holster, was a revolver-type Hand

Persuader. (Note: a Persuader is a gun; in this case, it is a pistol.)

She wore a furred cap that covered her head and ears, goggles with yellow-tinted lens that covered her eyes, and a cloth wrapped many times around her face. One wouldn’t be able to guess her expression at all. A weak light shone on the driver and motorad’s left.

“The road’s snapped down in steepness compared to noon. Should I read off the temperature to you, Kino?”

So asked the motorad to its driver.

“No, that’s fine. I can tell it’s pretty cold.”

So the driver named Kino promptly replied. The voice came out rather muffled from beneath the cloth.

“Anyway, I think we’re about to hit our ‘destination’ pretty soon. Although…still can’t see it either, Hermes?”

While Kino spoke, she dropped her speed as she rounded about a tight curve. The back wheel skidded to the side and threw up some dust.

After which,

“Still a ways off.”

Just like the motorad Hermes said, straight ahead was only the same curves as before. Kino accelerated again.

“The country we’re heading for now—”

Hermes stopped midway; then,

“Well, it’s not really a ‘country’ anymore, is it?”

So it corrected itself.

“Technically, the ‘remains of a country.’ But that’s a mouthful, so you can keep it to ‘country.’ —it’s been cleared out four years ago and no one’s there. Someone who used to live there told me that, so it can’t be wrong.”

“That part, I haven’t heard, Kino. Why was it abandoned?”

“Right. I asked him about that, too, but…it was a weird story.”

“What was it?”

“Bad luck, he said.”

“Pardon me?”

“The people lived there for a long time. But one day, a ‘traveling fortune-teller’ came and told their fortune. She said, ‘The buildings and the way the roads are arranged are bad luck. The citizens will meet with misfortune. Someday, everyone will fall through the earth! Everyone will fall to Hell!’”

“So? Just because of that?”

Hermes asked with an expression of surprise, and Kino nodded. Then,

“He said the people were extremely grieved. Rather than rebuild it all over again, immigrating would be faster, so everyone moved to all sorts of different countries. Being scientifically advanced, they were welcomed and readily accepted. And so they lived happily ever after.”

“Uh-huh… There are all kinds of people, aren’t there? People who say right off the bat everyone’s going to be unhappy, people who abandon their country without a second thought, people who detour and think cold thoughts and visit these countries.” So said Hermes, who was either amazed or profoundly moved.

“Well, I guess that’s true. Although, as long as they’re happy—that is, as long as they’re able to acknowledge they’re happy—then that’s fine.”

So returned Kino.

Driving through another curve, the mountain passed by from view.

And beyond this steep hill lay those country’s remains.

Founded on the basin between the mountains, it was broadly encircled by a stone wall. A country great in size, indeed. Within those high walls, various houses of earthy color dotted the inside as if fine details of a particular pattern.

“We’re coming in.”

So saying, Kino slowly drove Hermes in through the open gate. A great door occupied that wide space in the city walls, whittled and crafted from a large piece of stone. It was ajar and covered in sand.

Kino and Hermes drove into the city now dimly lit by the evening. Crossing the city square laid before the gate, a wide road brought them to its heart.

The buildings by either side were entirely of stone, some as high as five stories. The windows were boarded up, but otherwise, the buildings were intact.

Kino and Hermes proceeded slowly on the lonely road . The sound of Hermes’s engine reverberated upon the buildings and then died in the air.

“Quite fine, this city. ‘course, we haven’t visited very many ruins, though.”

So said Hermes, to whom Kino assented. The road was unlittered, so neat that it easily felt it was only abandoned yesterday.

“Ah…thanks to that.”

So said Kino, stopping Hermes at an intersection. A dull sound resounded in the intersected streets and a small truck passed by. Upon closer inspection, its tires were fitted with sweeping brushes and water was sprayed from the back. No one was in the driver’s seat. The round handle moved automatically in small movements.

“Oh, my.”

So said a slightly surprised Hermes.

“Look, Kino. It’s unmanned. This city’s as advanced as they said.”

“I heard they left the country without switching off the city management devices.”

So returned Kino, who then sped off with Hermes.

“Why?”

“So that if someone felt like living here, it would look hospitable.”

“How polite of them. —oh! The lights are on.”

In the middle of Hermes's words, city lights situated between the sidewalk and the edges of the road lit up one by one. As if racing with them on the streets, the lights completely overtook Kino and Hermes.

"So, the city still works. I was told that if I liked, I could live here. —given I wasn't afraid of Hell."

"So what'll you do? You're not afraid of 'going to Hell' all of a sudden, are you?"

Kino replied to the teasing Hermes,

"Lemme think…that's a good idea. If I leave you upturned over, label you as a neglected vehicle and take one of those cleaning ones with me instead—"

"You shouldn't. A great person said that those who don't treat their motorads nicely go to Hell."

"Oh, that's frightening. I guess I'll stop. —let's find a proper resting place and call it a day. We'll take a look around tomorrow and then leave the day after."

Kino picked a particularly large building along the road and investigated inside. Very much like a department store, Kino dragged out a bed from the warehouse and laid it on the empty floor.

After finishing her portable food,

“It’s pretty different from when the wind and the chilly ground are the only things protecting you. —good night, Hermes.”

Still in her thick clothes, revolver beneath her pillow, she curled up in her winter sleeping bag.

In the still, cold thoroughfare, only the systematically lined street lights glowed.

Above, the stars in their brilliant sky glittered briskly.

The next day, Kino awoke with the dawn.

The sky was clear. In the unrelenting cold, Kino lightly wrapped her face in the soaked cloth. Then she conducted her exercises, not so intensive that she would sweat.

Then burned fuel to boil some water. After adding some sugar, she drank her tea. The moment she gingerly finished her portable food, Hermes woke up.

Kino was surprised, and upon Hermes’s saying that it had moments like these, asked,

“So, Kino. What’s the plan for today?”

“Go for some sightseeing, and—”

“Sightseeing and?”

“Scavenging for useful things.”

So replied Kino. After a few seconds, Hermes spoke again.

“So was that the reason for coming here?”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Destined to poverty. Or stingy, I should say. Can’t think of any other words.”

“I don’t object to those.”

So replied Kino.

With all the luggage strapped, Kino and Hermes explored the empty city.

Other than the occasional cleaning truck, no other animated object was there. Not a cloud hung in the sky, and neither was there a living thing in this cold world.

In the heart of the city was a man-made lake. Beside the utterly frozen ice was a large park, containing the last stone monument the city ever made.

The reason for their abandonment was thoroughly explained and properly carved upon it. On the back was written, “It’s no good, I can’t understand this mess at all. From a traveler,” scribbled in paint.

A bit before noon, Kino found a still steam-spewing facility just outside the country’s northern border, and by Hermes’s request inspected its workings. It was a power plant, run on nuclear power and still very much active. Kino went ahead and used the still-operational bathtub, and on occasion, “Are you still there, Kino?”

“I got to one hundred, Kino.”

“Don’t drown, okay, Kino?”

“If you’re in there too long, you’ll get pruny, Kino.”

She used it for quite a while.

Afterwards, she found a food storehouse and peered inside, finding a great load of preserved grain that was not taken during the immigration.

“Alright!”

“You thief!”

Kino lifted up one of the great, heavy sacks, asked Hermes if it was okay to strap it on, and once it replied yes as long as you don’t mind lots of tire punctures, she put it back.

Just a bit before evening, Kino found an oil-mining purification plant.

“Got it!”

“Take it!”

She replenished enough fuel for Hermes’s tank and the cans she possessed.

When evening arrived, music played in the city deserted but for Kino and Hermes. A gentle melody flowed from the speakers on the street corners, and then twice, it said, “It’s time to return. Be good, everyone, and let’s go home.”

Kino chose a ground floor apartment on a residential for that night’s shelter. She stored Hermes in the empty living room. She broke a number of lightly dusted chairs and used that for wood, starting a fire in a fireplace that had not a speck of ash. Then she tested the switch in the hallway, happily finding that the lights worked, along with the heating system.

Kino tinkered with a television whose monitor was buried in a wooden frame as well, but after two seconds of static, it went dead.

“Oh, well. Let’s go to sleep.”

Using the big sofa for her bed, she curled up in her sleeping bag, more lightly dressed since the room was warm.

“Mm, that was pretty fun.”

“That was. It’s been a while since an empty country, though.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow. Good night, Hermes.”

“Good night, Kino.”

The next morning.

Before departure, Kino was looking for sellable goods, as well as useful items.

“Robbing again, huh, Kino?”

After looking through the apartment,

“Hm……?”

She found a hung corpse.

The body was in the room adjacent to where she slept, specifically in the small closet. The rope was slack and the feet touched the floor, such that one would think he were looking down, or even standing. Apparently a middle-aged man, still in full dress, the atmosphere did not allow him to rot but rather mummified him.

On the wall was the suicide's last message.

Hermes interrogated Kino upon return, to whom she replied,

"It said, 'I don't want to leave my country. But I don't want to go to Hell, either. By my own wish, I will take flight to Heaven myself. I have no regrets.'"

"Hm. I wonder if he made it?"

"Who knows. But—"

"But?"

"He left this. It was near the body."

From her pocket, she drew out a folding device about as large as a book. Kino sat beside Hermes and inspected it. The device was black. When it was opened, there was a monitor screen on the lid, and before it a keyboard.

“What do you think it is?”

“There’s something like an antenna on it. Must be a portable computer terminal. It should be able to display textual data on the screen.”

So replied Hermes. Kino asked if you handled it badly would it explode, and Hermes replied probably not. Kino pushed the on button, and hit random keys on the keyboard. The screen lit on and displayed numbers that looked like the date, then stopped.

“Whatever I press now doesn’t work. Do you know how to use it, Hermes?”

“Surprisingly, no. —not that there’s anyone to ask.”

“Oh, well.”

Kino switched it off. She folded it, wrapped it in cloth, and placed it in her bag.

“What’re you going to do with that?”

“Take it.”

“Thought so.”

Kino drove Hermes to the western gate.

Like when she first came, Kino wore her thick winter clothes, her yellow goggles, and the cloth around her face .

Along the dimly lit road, they periodically passed by the ever-so-diligent sweeping truck.

At length, the apartments on either side disappeared, replaced by a large city block lined with buildings the size of schools or hospitals. Ahead on the wide road, they began to catch sight of the tall city walls. When Kino opened the accelerator to greatly increase her speed,

“Something weird’s off to the left.”

So Hermes suddenly said. Kino closed the accelerator, but did not brake. After letting Hermes move by its own momentum, it stopped.

While turning to behold a large white building, Kino asked Hermes,

“What do you mean by ‘weird’?”

“I wonder. It’s not anything I’ve seen before. It’s kind of like a half-buried egg, a low dome made out of concrete. It’s a strange building. I saw it for an instant from the space there.”

“Then I’ll take a look, too.”

Kino slowly turned Hermes around and then sped to the site. They passed by what seemed like a parking lot and cut past the building,

“See, that.”

Just as Hermes said, they arrived in front of a dome-like bulge. A dome that could house a cemetary or a monument was built in the center of the courtyard. A ramp one car width across was built as the entrance, at the end of which stood a steel door.

Pulling her goggles up and lowering the cloth from her face, Kino’s breath came out in white puffs as she said, “What is it……? A cemetary? Let’s look at the front.”

Kino drove Hermes slowly down the ramp. As soon as they stopped before the door,

“Welcome.”

A woman’s sedated voice spoke from a speaker by the side. Stunned for a moment, Kino soon replied,

“Ah, hello. What would this—”

Be? Kino was cut off before she finished speaking, and the voice continued on its own.

“In the case that you desire an acquaintance with the master, please wait. In the case you have no business, please depart.”

“What’s that?”

“Who knows?”

Kino and Hermes exchanged their doubts, though when they didn’t move for some time,

“It seems the master will meet with you. Welcome.”

Soon after the voice finished, the metal door slid aside without a sound. What lay ahead was a four-cornered space resembling an elevator. A space large enough to fit a car in.

“What to do, Kino?”

“Dunno……I don’t quite understand.”

“If there’s a master, then that means someone’s there, right?”

“But this country—”

Should’ve been empty. The moment Kino tried to say that,

“Ah, welcome, welcome! Please come in. Welcome, traveler! The motorad, too!”

A startlingly different voice than before could be heard , belonging to a young man.

“…….”

Kino drove Hermes slowly forward. Once inside the four-cornered space, she cut off the engine. Behind her, the doors began to close

“Are you sure, Kino? It could be a trap.”

“Curiosity got the better of me.”

The doors shut and the box began to move down. So smoothly and without sudden jerks.

After some ten seconds, the elevator was still descending.

“Wow, it’s deep.”

So said an honest Hermes.

It finally stopped, and white doors opposite the ones they came through began to open.

Just after the doors opened, they saw a room. There was a space where a human would live.

Chairs, a table, a chest of drawers—furniture of that sort were arranged in the room. On the walls hung paintings.

In a corner of the room, a large television was mounted on a platform. Brightly lit lamps dangled from the high ceiling. The size and appearance was much like a normal living room. Only there was no window. The walls, of course, thought nothing of it and simply stretched on and on.

“Welcome, traveler.”

There in the center stood a young man.

Slender, he looked to be in his early twenties, dressed in long trousers and a white shirt whose cuffs dangled off his form. His face, too, was thin, beneath short but ruffled ashen hair. His pallor was not unlike a patient in a hospital, but his manner, on the contrary, was very bright, and broke in a short run to approach Kino.

“Umm, good morning. I’m Kino. This here is Hermes.”

After greeting and introducing themselves,

“You must have been the voice earlier.”

“And you’re quite right. –come in, come in. I’ll bring out some tea.”

Kino did as he directed, pushing Hermes into the room. The white walls that opened from the elevator looked like a normal wall of a house from inside. They closed silently.

Kino stood Hermes by the side of a small round table and removed her thick layer of clothes. The room was quite warm, so she shed her jacket as well and sat in a chair with just her shirt. The holster hung on her belt.

The room was adjacent to the kitchen, beyond which seemed like a bedroom. Together, they comprised a space quite like a single-floored house buried underground.

The man prepared the tea in the kitchen and brought the pot out. He set a mug for his personal use and a much newer one for his guest’s use on the table.

As he served tea, the man inquired,

“I wonder, were you about to leave from the western gate? I apologize if I’ve perhaps hindered you.”

Kino followed an affirmative with a negative, answering that as long as they left within the day, time was of no concern.

“Oh, thank goodness!”

He offered tea to Kino. She then said,

“It smells interesting. What kind of tea is this?”

She observed his response. He merely said it was ordinary tea and drank it, after which Kino followed likewise. She said it was delicious.

“Ahh, it’s been a long time since I’ve had a guest. It’s great.”

After the man made his statement, Kino said,

“I’d like to know about a few things…”

“Well, of course. Why I’m living underground, alone, right? Of course I’ll tell you! It’s fun! Telling it, that is. Yep!”

So said the man in a child-like manner with a child-like smile.

“So, why I’m here living alone—”

“Yes.”

“Can’t be helped. I’m sick.”

“A disease, is it?”

“Yep. And there was a high risk of it being contagious. ”

“Then, quinidine?”

Neither made a response to Hermes’s question.

After a time, Kino said,

“…quarantine?”

“Yeah, that!

Then Hermes went quiet.

The man nodded several times before fiercely shaking his head.

“Oh, but you’re fine, Kino! Since you’re not from this country. —it doesn’t infect foreigners. The only people who can meet me are foreigners.”

“What kind of disease is this?”

Hermes asked directly. The man replied happily.

“If I’m out in the sun even a little bit, my body becomes a real mess. That’s why I’m here underground. Have you ever heard of something like this during your travels?”

Kino furrowed her eyebrows.

“I have. Only—I never heard that it was contagious.”

“That might be so in other countries, but here, it’s contagious. Only amongst the people in this country. And the reason for that would be—”

"Would be?"

"Of course, because of the legend! Long, long ago, when our ancestors suffered in the sun's rays, the chieftain at the time fervently prayed for rain, even if it would mean they would never see the sun ever again. It came true and it did rain, but then the chieftain suddenly couldn't live when he was in the sunlight. It spread to his family, so they all lived where the sun couldn't reach them. When they had children, they couldn't go outside, so they died. The chieftain cried hard. But since then, the sun's rays no longer harmed them. —That's the legend handed down in this country! Just like it says, people like me come out from time to time, so they have to quarantine me! You got it now, right?!"

Kino stared at the man, so proud of himself.

"Ahh, I see…"

So she muttered.

"Now we know about the legend, and Kino won't get infected—"

But Hermes got cut off.

“So that’s that! I’ve been living here for the past eight years, now!”

He announced, eyes sparkling.

“It was hard at first, but it’s no sweat now! Of course, I get my food and drink shipped through the elevator! And they’re all things I like! Oh, there are also stuff I didn’t like at first but I can stand, now! Like raisins! It’s cold up there year-round, but it’s warm in here! The word ‘comfortable’ exists just to describe this place! There’s not a single day that’s boring! I’ll tell you about that later, though!”

Being so happy from talking that he’d be ready to bust at the seams, the man jabbered on and on.

“None of your people come…so why not talk to them by phone?”

“Nope! Wouldn’t want to infect them!”

“…”

A silent Kino stole a glance at Hermes.

“Go on.”

So it replied curtly.

Kino turned back to the man, and proceeded with a hint of a shadow in her face.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Of course! Anything!”

“Then I’ll ask.”

After the man finished his tea with delight and set the mug on the table, Kino asked,

“Are you aware that in this country, no one but you remains?”

After two seconds, the man sputtered, and for twenty seconds, he laughed and laughed.

“Ahahahaha! —that again! That’s so funny! All travelers are so funny!”

Clutching his belly, he proceeded thus for another twenty seconds.

“…….”

Kino watched the scene, silent.

When the laughter subsided,

“All travelers come tell me this. Is there some sort of plot against me? Ahh, that’s just too funny!”

Wiping the tears from his eyes, the man spoke.

“Sorry, but that's a secret, y'know.”

Hermes replied in the same tone, and the man smiled with an "exactly, exactly."

“I remember, ever since four years back when I invited travelers in here, they all started saying that! Like, ‘No one’s in this place anymore,’ or, ‘Do you see? You’ve been left behind.’ They’re so dead-pan, too, so I explode every time.”

Kino remained silent and,

“Well? Well?”

Hermes happily chimed in.

“Well, if you’re trying to fool me, I’m not falling for it. Though it’s very funny. —well, I tell them I don’t believe it, so most give up, but there were some who were really mad, too. And some who said ridiculous things like, ‘ Then I’ll show you the truth, come out with me.’ That one’s being pushy. But those people gave up, too. Eventually.” Kino opened her mouth.

“It doesn’t seem like you believe that ‘no one is in this country anymore’—”

“Ahaha! Of course! There’s no way I’d believe that!”

“And why is that? If you can, please tell me.”

“So that too, huh? —of course, it’s very easy!”

So saying, the man stood up. He walked to the television, picked up the remote that lay on top of it, and pressed a button.

For an instant, the screen flickered to reveal grounds full of young men and women, then an old man before a chalkboard.

“If you apply the proper formula to these numbers—”

“I hate studying.”

So said the man, rapidly switching channels. The screen completely changed to that of a concert hall, where a lady in an elegant dress was performing on a piano.

“……”

Silent, Kino kept her eye on his movements. He flipped through the channel over ten times, all displaying different images. A sport where people were kicking a ball, a cooking channel, a movie in black and white.

In the end, he settled on the piano performance. A brilliant one, of which he commented,

“I bet it’d be great if I could do as much as her.”

So he muttered to himself. Then he turned to Kino and Hermes and smiled.

“Well? These television broadcasts have never stopped in all these years.”

Kino asked, were there any live news broadcasts running, to which he replied, “Nah. This country never had one to begin with. Everything on this is pre-recorded.”

“Then aren’t these just recorded shows played over and over and over again? It’s not really proof that people are still here.”

So said Hermes. The man happily responded,

“I knew you’d come up with that! Truth is, the traveler before you said the same. —but, oh, once that traveler saw this, he shut up and backed off, though.”

The man stood and then disappeared into a room opposite the kitchen, holding a folding device the size of a book.

It was a pale blue. On the lid was a screen and before it a beyboard.

“Ah, I’ve seen that before.”

So said Hermes. Kino extracted exactly the same device and set it atop the table.

“Oh? This is the first time I’ve ever seen a traveler have one! What a great day! So Kino, how’d you get a hold of one? It’s our country’s equivalent of an ID, so it’s not really possible for you to have one.”

“It fell beside a corpse and I picked it up.”

Upon Kino’s reply, the man broke out in laughter again, holding it for ten seconds.

“You really are much more interesting than these other travelers! People who can tell jokes with such a straight face really are rare!”

“So, what does it do?” Hermes asked the question. The man eventually regained himself and opened his light blue device. At that moment, the piano concert disappeared and was nearly buried beneath the sudden block of text.

Kino watched the television screen, then inquired,

“What is that?”

“I wonder what?”

So the man replied jokingly, though the one who replied was Hermes.

“That’s the screen for information transfer, isn’t it? That you can operate with that device.”

“Absolutely correct! Amazing! That’ll save me a lot of time. This here’s an outstanding communication device developed in this country. Through it, you can carry out ‘ exchanges’ with people in the form of textual data. Television, you just take in the information, but this is different. It’s two-way correspondence.”

“Hmm. Kino, are you following this?”

“Somewhat.”

“You can display it on the device’s screen, but on television, the words are larger and easier to read. —can you two see? I’ll get it closer.”

He pushed the platform towards them. As it was fitted with wheels, it approached the front of the round table while making noises from the motor, then stopped.

“I’ll raise it, now.”

With clicks and clatters, the man operated the keyboard. The box atop the platform rose without a sound to a comfortable eye level. Kino and Hermes watched the screen. There it said,

<*Welcome*> and <*Please choose a genre*> in huge letters.

“This is what I want you to see. You pick a genre and you join in the conversation.” Below it was a list of some hundred of those genres. It was incredibly diverse, from broad ones like <*Concerning the Country’s Politics*>, <*Talking About Life*>, and <*Counseling*> to specific ones like <*Mayonaise on Boiled Vegetables*> and <*My belt’s been getting tight recently*>.

“So you’re saying that right now, you can have exchanges with ‘people’ at the other end of the device?”

So asked Kino, answered with an of course by the man .

“Doing it’s very fast. I’ll go to <*Bored Gathering*> and start up a topic about a traveler. You can choose to go under your real name or a pseudonym. If people found out I was the guy who was sick, they’d probably freak out, so pseudonym for me. You can also look for topics, too.”

So saying, he hammered away at the keyboard, so fast that the sounds simply fused together. It was as if he had thirty fingers.

“You can play piano, after all.”

So muttered Hermes.

Characters ran violently across the screen.

<There’s a young traveler on a motorad who just dropped by and is sitting in my room right now. Anyone interested in this ?>

The words jumped to the top of the screen. Ten seconds did not pass when it was met with,

<Yeah, I am!>

<Called me?>

<Man, that’s nice. Wonder if he/she might come over?>

<Bring it on!>

<If that’s true, that’s amazing.>

<What kind of person?>

<If this's some cheap gimmick to waste my time, I'm gonna get pissed off! Although I'm bored.>

<Whatever, just get on with it.>

<ENVY!>

<More info, please.>

<It is a she? She pretty?>

All at once. The words from the bottom washed out the ones at top.

"Amazing, isn't it? These are all the bored people in this country with nothing to do! Every response represents one person's opinion. Even now, this moment, all these people and I are connected!"

As the youth happily said this, he composed a response with speed beyond visual perception.

<I'm about to explain it right now, so just sit tight, everybody!>

Large characters torrented across the screen, all of which the man interpreted in an instant and replied to.

Once he finished talking about Kino and Hermes from beginning to end,

“Well, let’s try it, then.”

So saying in a slightly mischievous manner, he typed that Kino, like all the other travelers, told him the same lie that “no one other than you is here anymore.”

Various responses came.

<My God, that’s real hilarious! So what are we, then?>

<Dead, of course! Haha!>

<I know! Travelers have this knack of trying to scare people with lies!>

<Though, I wonder what’s the motive for telling such a flimsy lie?>

<You with the traveler: you live down in a village or something? Is there nobody around? That sort of situation for the lie is too crazy.>

<Maybe he's shut up in a house all by himself and the traveler dropped by. Then you ought to open the curtains every once in a while, dude. It's good for you.>

<Man, you guys must be so bored.>

<Hey, you are, too.>

<Come now, don't fight.>

<As I recall, today's not a holiday. Is everyone off work or something?>

<Shh, not that.>

<I'm playing hookey!>

<Hey, never underestimate your wife.>

The man thanked the participators of the conversation for the moment.

<Well, I'll go back to talking with the traveler, now. Talk to you later. I'll tell you more when I come back!>

After sending this message off, he turned off the power. The numerous characters disappeared off the screen. The television automatically returned to its normal position.

He turned back to Kino, who was sipping tea that had long gone cold, and said,

“See? Well? You think you can fool me when I’m connected to all these people?”

Seeing his brilliant smile,

“…no.”

So Kino replied, and just when you thought he could smile no more, he did.

“Right?! And—”

“And?”

So asked Hermes. The man replied.

“Now you know why I’m never bored! While I’m here, I’m connected to everybody. We fight sometimes, but we still live together! There’s no way I can be lonely!”

“By the way, would you like more tea?”

Kino and Hermes were both silent, so he asked them this.

Kino refused, explaining they had to leave soon. Then she held out the device she picked up and inquired,

“Would it be possible for me to use this, too?”

“Sure. Hold on a sec.”

He connected it to his own device via some sort of cable, switching between the two countless times. Some ten seconds later,

“Done. I’ve configured it so that anyone can use it. So now it’s yours. If you follow the instructions on the screen afterwards, then you can participate in conversations like I just did.” Kino received the device back.

“Thank you. I’ll try it later on.”

So she said, placing it in the box on Hermes’s back wheel.

“May I ask you something?”

So asked Kino, to which the man readily consented, saying, “Anything, anything.”

“Then, first of all—would I be able to have these exchanges with people from outside the country?”

“No, it’s impossible. Just with the people here.”

“I see.”

Kino nodded once, then said,

“Since when were you able to carry out these exchanges with these people in this country?”

“Strangely, ever since the travelers started lying to me—”

The man smiled.

“Four years ago.”

Kino drove Hermes through the frigid air, reaching the front of the western gate. The space before it was a square after all, with cleanly swept benches lined up, and a perpetually silent fountain and a pond drained of water long ago.

Kino braked Hermes and stopped the engine.

“What’s the matter?”

As Hermes asked this, Kino let down the kickstand and got off. She took out the device from the box and removed her gloves, turning the switch on.

While the device launched,

“See, about that…”

Hermes murmured.

“There’s the manufacturing date on the bottom. Looks like it was made six years ago.”

“Which means…”

"That the exchanges could have begun at any time then."

"…… I see. I got it."

After the characters appeared on the small screen, Kino searched for the subject the man started up.

There was the man's ceaseless continuation on the traveler, something along the line of she came and lied to him that no one was there, but he didn't fall for it.

"………"

After observing this for some time, Kino began typing clumsily.

"What are you going to do, Kino?"

"I think it's fine to let it be."

So Kino murmured, and in time, she composed a new message.

<Just now, I saw the traveler leave through the western gate . Probably the same one you're talking about. She seemed pretty down that you didn't fall for the lie.>

There was no one by the device.

The device was left alone in the square, atop an empty bench.

The screen on the opened lid, displaying Kino's response toward the man, was soon met with a reply.

<See!>

The Country of Disappointment —Hope Against Hope—

“Traveler! Traveler!”

“Me? —yes, what is it?”

“Sorry for catching you while you’re packing up to go. But as a citizen of this country, there’s one thing I’d like to ask of you.”

“Ooh, what what? Something Kino might know?”

“It’s something only a traveler can do. –please tell us your opinion of our country!”

“Let’s see… It was a very pleasant stay. It’s a wonderful country.”

“Yeah, yeah. No one tried to jump us and no motorad thieves, either.”

“All the people I met were kind—personally, I loved the meals. The fried chicken soaked in vinegar and topped with tartar sauce was superb. I’d actually come again just for that.”

“Is that so… I guess that’s great, that we’ve satisfied you…”

“Why the down face when we praised you? Is there something bothering you?”

“Ah…yeah, sort of…”

“What, what?”

“Er…it’ll sound weird, but…it’s a request for the traveler.”

“What is it?”

“When you go to other places, and they ask you about this country—”

“Yes.”

“Could you badmouth us with all your heart?”

“Pardon me?”

“Badmouth us. Like ‘it mistreats travelers so badly,’ or ‘the food is awful,’ or ‘it wasn’t comfortable,’ or…”

“Why?”

“Truth is…our country gets lots of travelers and merchants, and word gets passed down in its own way…but it seems all that comes out are good opinions—how the people are nice, how we’re always thought of as a country who greatly welcomes our guests.”

“My, my.” “Please continue.”

“In actuality, that’s not the case. There are some people like that, who think, ‘it’s been a long while since we’ve had a newcomer,’ so they welcome them with open arms and pay for them right out of their own pockets. But there are also people who don’t think so kindly of guests and end up avoiding, even hating them. And then that disappoints some of the people who come here.”

“Disappointment, is it?”

“Yes. They are clearly disillusioned and we know how gloomy they become. Some of them even get angry and exclaim, ‘I never would have thought it was so horrible! I should have never come!’”

“Oh my.”

“As for us, we’re just normal people living our normal lives every day. Very normal lives. With such high expectations, we get so confused. In the end, we end up wishing we could get the guests who come and leave to spread bad rumors about us. Could you favor us with this?”

“Me… I’m not really good at lying, so on this matter, I can’t do anything but tell the truth. Unfortunately, I won’ t be able to grant your request, I’m sorry.”

“I see… No, it’s my fault for bringing up an reasonable favor.”

“Hey hey, I was wondering, if you wanted to look bad to travelers—”

“Yes.”

“From the moment they come to the moment they leave, you could have just treated them badly from the start. Then it’ll naturally get around how horrible a country this is.”

“Oh! No! We could never be so rude! Never!”

After departing, the traveler said,

“Just a while ago, I thought, ‘It’s a rather wonderful country’—”

To her own motorad.

“But now I’ll revise that to, ‘It was a very splendid country.’”

The Land of Ajin (etc.) — With You —

A car ran on as it brushed the blue-green sea.

Small, yellow, and rundown, ready to fall apart at any moment; the fact that it was still running was a miracle.

Luggage packed the back seat, and additional fuel cans on the roof and rear carrier, clunked together noisily.

The car hobbled on the border of the beach and the blue sea, tires treading the fairly damp sand.

Ahead, the right hand was earth and the left the sea.

The sea was calm and the white edges of waves piled upon one another, breaking and receding on the shore.

The long stretch of shoal led on to the desert. Though a desert, it was not sandy but rather a space of rocks and hard earth that stretched to the horizon. No mountains, no greens.

There was not a cloud in the sky, and the white sun at its zenith shone radiantly.

It shone radiantly, but this was the middle of winter, so it hardly contributed to the temperature very much. Only a comfortable wind blew from shore to sea.

In the driver seat, a woman with long black hair of unknown age gripped the handle. She wore a white shirt and a black jacket of high quality. On her thigh, there was a large caliber revolver in its holster.

On the left passenger seat stood a man. Hair of light brown, short-sleeved jacket, handsome and on the short side. On his left leg, a Persuader with a square barrel could be seen in its holster. (Note: A Persuader is a firearm; in this case, it is a pistol.)

Half of the man stuck out of the sunroof as he held binoculars to his eyes, inspecting the way ahead. Direction: South.

And then,

“I see it! We’re almost there! Ahh, wow, that took a while. How boring it was.”

So saying happily, the man thumped down in his seat.

Very soon, a diminutive island revealed itself through the windshield.

It was a green island.

This island was linked to the shore, located on the straight coast of some hundred meters, the round little island was linked by shore and sand.

“I see, an island connected to the mainland via tombolo. The surrounding sand formed a beach around the island.”

The woman in the driver’s seat said nonchalantly.

The main in the passenger’s seat looked at her from the side.

“Quite knowledgeable, aren’t you, Master? It’s the first I’ve ever heard you say anything of the kind.”

“It’s the sort of thing that wouldn’t bother anyone whether you remember it or not, that’s why.”

“Well, certainly… But, now I remember it. ‘Tombolo.’ I won’t forget. Though I can’t tell when I’d apply the knowledge next.”

“Then I’ll supplement that. The part that stretches out into the sea is called a spit, and the part that connects to the island and the opposite shore is a sandbar.”

“Wow. —Would that happen to be on the test?”

“Who knows. Do you still intend to go to school?”

“Not at all. Besides, when I was a kid, I was quite the stellar student. Full marks on all tests. Though I was a prodigy with a promising future.”

“……”

“Aren’t you going to ask ‘why’s that?’”

“Why’s that?”

“I forgot. I have a habit of forgetting things that don’t much matter.”

While this silly talk was carrying on, the car neared the island.

The island was incredibly round, packed with mountains, and entirely covered with water and plants.

From the sky, the island would look like a lone green dot.

And, it showed proof of human settlement.

The houses on the slopes were buried into the trees, and a number of wooden boats floated by the rocks onshore. There also appeared to be storage houses.

The walls were located by the sandbank where people placed rocks to block vehicle entry.

“Come now, no one’d ever think of attacking a place so remote.”

So said the man.

Now when the car approached the shore at the foot of the island, it started curving towards the bridge of clumped sand—that is, to the left.

As they advanced on the sandy bridge, the green mountain began to tug up more and more. As small as it looked far away, close up, it was actually quite huge. Diameter: about two kilometers.

Evergreens overgrew the island and birds flew high overhead.

Ahead of the sandbank, the ground flattened out near the rocks and several erected houses were visible. The residents appeared to total some teens of people.

They wore articles called short sleeves and shorts—that sort of simple clothing. They looked curiously at the oncoming car. Smiles adorned their suntanned faces.

As the car approached the stone wall, several middle-aged men, barehanded, approached the vehicle.

The lady and man descended the car and began exchanging greetings with the people. Then they sought permission for entry.

The residents happily welcomed the travelers, since a year had passed without any visitors.

It was not possible to enter the country—that is, the island—as they were, so the car was left at the walls. The man took the two bags and entered the walls.

Then,

“Hm…?”

He noticed some letters inscribed on a stone.

The faces were sanded smoothly. Each rock seemed of considerable weight, and across the surface spanned many letters and numbers, astonishingly neat. Rather than carved, the characters looked fresh out of a book.

The man stopped in his tracks and the woman likewise cast over her eyes.

“…well, not that I can read these, but what are these characters?”

When the male traveler asked a countryman, the latter replied with a smile.

“That here is the name of our country.”

“Name? —so then, this long string is all of it?”

“Yes. All of the characters written there make up our country’s name. It’s carved in properly using our ancient written language.”

The traveler was speechless for a while.

“That’s long.”

Once he said so,

“Yes, it’s long,”

The countryman smiled.

The female traveler glanced at the man who held the luggage. He continued,

“Why is it so long, if I may ask?”

The countryman responded, still smiling.

“We do not know, either. But, it’s the name.”

And he pointed to another rock. It was smaller, right next to the long, long country name, which also had an engraving. This one, however, was short.

“Aah, I can read that one.”

It had a number. Only reading “1,004.”

“That’s the population in our country now. When there is a change, a new number is inscribed on a new rock.”

So the countryman said.

And so, the pair who got on shore was guided to the largest wooden building in the vicinity labeled “Public Hall.”

There, they received a very grand welcome. It was a dinner with the guides (who were all adults).

Over half of the 1,004 people who were not present got into a great fuss, pushing each other aside to get a glimpse of the travelers. Once men and women of all ages gathered, they popped their faces by turn through the hall’s window.

The lady always kept her cool, and the man at times smiled and waved, winked at the younger ladies, and responded to the residents' queries.

The elder came out to greet them, a dinner of fish and chicken.

It definitely was not a high-class sort of meal, but the pair knew well how this poor country was already scraping by on their limited resources, so they thanked them politely and dug in.

There, they were asked about the state of nearby nations and replied sincerely.

There was no empire planning to attack, nor some deadly epidemic that hadn't struck them yet. The people were relieved.

After dinner, the guides attended to the guests. They will walk the island—essentially, the country. Shuffling behind, the leisurely residents began maintaining their distance.

The entire island was mountainous, so every path was sloped. Narrow roads wound about the island and all wooden houses were modified to them.

The forest was thick, abundant in greens. Birds called excitedly. The early afternoon was very tranquil.

Upon ascending the mountain, located on the summit—the highest place in the country—was a pool brimming with beautifully clear water. Like the crater of a volcano, there were depressions in the ground where the water could collect.

It was a pond meant to accumulate water during the rainy reason for half the year. Which meant someone cleared away part of the mountain and labored to dig a deep hole long, long ago.

Once they learned that this water jug was the sustenance of 1,004 people,

“That’s terrible. Whatever I do, I’d better not fall.”

The male traveler joked and made them laugh, then moved away from the water’s edge.

The tour of the island ended and the two returned to the public hall. They sat on the bench prepared for them and took some hot tea.

The sky gradually turned to madder red and reddened the desert earth.

The guide warned the clusters of surrounding people not to push, and so it ended up that they clustered about the travelers a distance away.

“Feels like being a star. Even though we’ll be leaving tomorrow. I wonder if they’ll remember us.”

So said the male traveler.

And then with a preface of Oh, come to think of it,

“Now that I recall, this country’s name is very long, isn’t it? Isn’t it troublesome to remember?”

“No. Everyone remembers it easily, sir. And we’ll never forget it,” one of the guides smiled. We’ll prove it to you, he said, and from the crowd, “Miss White Fish Lover. If you please, come here.”

He called up a girl.

The male traveler tipped his head slightly at the name.

The girl named “Miss White Fish Lover,” about eight years old, leapt happily out from the line, and halted before the travelers and the guide seated on the bench.

“Good afternoon, Mister Traveler. Welcome to our country!”

The pair said thank you to the smiling girl.

The guide gently asked the girl,

“Miss White Fish Lover, can you recite the name?”

The girl briskly and happily replied.

“Of course! There’s no one here who can’t do it!”

“These two travelers aren’t native here, so they can’t read the letters on that stone. So, Miss White Fish Lover, could you recite it for them?”

“Yes! It’s a simple service to render!”

And then the girl sucked in a breath, as if before a recital.

“I am going to say the name. This is the country of Ajin Daa and Iel Daa and Patsu-e Daa and Aghe Daa and Zex Daa and Zezeh Daa and Eque Daa and Cain Daa and Ceble Daa and Namee Daa and Nimiji Daa and Nonoe Daa and Hakim Daa and Hatto Daa and Hareha Daa and Himire Daa and Mijin Daa and Mimiru Daa and Yagie Daa and Joseph Daa and Lolon Daa and Roele Daa and Pretty Moo and—”

As he watched this girl who ran it off so fluently, matched with an equally smooth enumeration,

“Wow.”

Some of the male traveler’s surprise escaped his lips.

The female traveler watched the girl’s face quietly.

As the girl took a short breather, she continued on with the name.

"—Puree Moo and Pawhate Moo and Yem Moo and Sevoo Moo and Dadan Moo and Diane Moo and Namire Moo and Neway Moo and Nozam Moo and Heart Moo and Hammer Moo and Mion Moo and Movie Moo and Yafa Moo and José Moo and Laennu Moo and Lalan Moo and Lilin Moo and Lilly Moo and Rend Moo and Royui Moo and Warts Moo and Waji Moo and Tosenu Zei and Utoe Zei and Kemire Zei and Sapou Zei and Suren Zei and Sooreh Zei and Soleb Zei and Niyaei Zei and Niniji Zei and Noren Zei and Nogure Zei and Baare Zei and Hejimi Zei and Hotoe Zei and Homer Zei and Mienu Zei and Mia Zei amd Muffy Zei and Mojie Zei and Linda Zei and Riie Zei and Benole Doe and Cots Doe and Kachio Doe and Kumuni Doe and Sapoe Doe and Subure Doe and Takeu Doe and Taata Doe and Toyme Doe and Touma Doe and Nack Doe and Nefa Doe and Nozan Doe and Nomiru Doe and Hobzi Doe and Meena Doe and Mobley Doe and Yohweh Doe and Link Doe and List Doe and Lule Doe and Luai Doe and Lemea Doe and Rojie Doe and Wacko Doe and—"

"Hm…"

Around there, the male traveler noticed something.

Behind the girl, the other citizens were moving their mouths, matched word-for-word to the girl's incantation.

That meant they had said it all this time without missing a word.

Amazing, the traveler mouthed.

And the name still went on.

"—Wacky Doe and Mimini Roo and Totetsu Roo and Karei Roo and Umimu Roo and Ereni Roo and Sabere Roo and Suzey Roo and Soap Roo and Dante Roo and Toll Roo and Nawdge Roo and Nemumi Roo and Bazil Roo and Hijibi Roo and Bouno Roo and Mamie Roo and Mabio Roo and Magare Roo and Megano Roo and Moiz Roo and Yoad Roo and Lilis Roo and Wood Goo and Otto Goo and Sonure Goo and Soae Goo and Taaa Goo and Neaka Goo and Hibini Goo and Homue Goo and Mox Goo and Mart Goo and Meemi Goo and Muei Goo and Meime Goo and Rufy Goo and Lett Goo and Ka-chin Soo and Emidzu Soo and Omiz Soo and Komise Soo and Code Suu and Slet Soo and Taleb Soo and Chijie Soo and Nazae Soo and Neoi Soo and Fweoo Soo and Bohma Soo and Deron Soo and Mooch Soo and Memiru Soo and Model Soo and Yomei Soo and Raara Soo and Lelet Soo and Waoji Soo and Kimaa Soo and Emize Yoo and Orote Yoo and Ozere Yoo and Sametsu Yoo and Soob Yoo and Soie Yoo Chimui Yoo and Torenu Yoo and Nazem Yoo and Narere Yoo and Hajin Yoo and Fu-fu Yoo and Hoy Yoo and Majin Yoo and Muau Yoo and Sayan Yoo and Modd Yoo and Rean Yuu and Buyme Aa and Mirei Aa and Orega Aa and Kion Aa and Keeze Aa and Kitaze Aa and Kuree Aa and Sawyou Aa and Shiogu Aa and Sefumi Aa and Soshimu Aa and Takui Aa and Dummy Aa and Chitami Aa and Teraa Aa and Naare Aa and Nuae Aa and Noway Aa and Foome Aa and Hegyy Aa and Hett Aa and Hotai Aa and Mapuo Aa and Mukyu Aa and Mezuru Aa and Mazuru Aa and Mokio Aa and Moork Aa and Yuiki Aa and Yoju Aa and Raoi Aa and Rimie Aa and Ryoki Aa and Ruuze Aa and Rujie Aa and Reira Aa and Reran Aa and Watt Aa and Wakim Aa and Ageze Oah and Yoki Oah and Shiami Oah and Semure Oah and Tayune Oah and Seou Oah and Sobuo Oah and Sorere Oah and Chiei Oah and Doren Oah and Neere Oah and Nuoki Oah and Neboo Oah and Bajee Oah and Nesuto Oah and Hamel Oah and Fubire Oah and Heyaa Oah and Heren Oah and Minami Oah and Mujina Oah and Moue Oah and Yoja Oah and Ryuk Oah and—”

Around here, even the male traveler who was incredibly impressed at first became exceedingly bored.

As he expressed admiration for the girl and the people behind her silently moving their mouths,

"……"

The man quietly, with indescribable expression, glanced at his neighbor.

The female traveler had her eyes fastened on the girl.

So he also returned his sight to the girl.

Her voice—yes, it still continued.

"—Ruve Oah and Rote Oah and Rukusu Oah and Olga Oah and Waren Oah and Watasu Oah and Umizu Oah and Bufumi Oah and Saeo Tsoo and Ieji Tsoo and Uzue Tsoo and Soyui Tsoo and Tsuie Tsoo and Dodo Tsoo and Nikoji Tsoo and Heat Tsoo and Yaeji Tsoo and Mirai Tsoo and Rimaa Tsoo and Minai Tsoo and Waamu Tsoo and Dagatsu Behh and Grey Behh and Ku-nu Behh and Ijio Behh and Seruru Behh and Tabure Behh and Toots Behh and Newt Behh and Nuzei Behh and Haah Behh and Heae Behh and Mazeeh Behh and Matt Behh and Rayuo Behh and Rigan Behh and Rojia Behh and Warz Behh and Sageru Foo and Kobaze Foo and Samere Foo and Seau Foo and Tamiu Foo and Furen Foo and Mibure Foo and Raeo Fuu and—" When it got to this point, the male traveler began to think of something else. He thought, When was the last time I calibrated the alignment laser on this Persuader? After puzzling, he remembered somehow, and then, I guess it was a while back so should I do it now? "—Loju Foo and Lost Foo and Wadge Foo and Bimit Kei and Save Kei and Darea Kei and Tsubuni Kei and Nebure Kei and Bart Kei and Babae Kei and Hodge Kei and Hoboo Kei and Bojin Kei and Maero Kei and Makina Kei and Migia Kei and Wafa Kei and Maze Kei and Mett Kei and Meimi Kei and Yumere Kei and Todd Kei and Rajif Kei and Ranzo Kei and Luan Kei and Russo Kei and Waff Kei and Migue Kaa and Kezemi Kaa and Danre Kaa and Dzujimi Kaa and Nemibi Kaa and Netra Kaa and Bajimu Kaa and Fozo Kaa and Holm Kaa and Hobzi Kaa and Mugae Kaa and Yumea Kaa and Ruum Kaa and Leamu Kaa and Wamji Kaa and Wazowa Kaa and Hamire Kaa and Nouno Kaa and Shachi Kaa and Karenu Ehh and Collets Ehh and Seren Ehh and Soren Ehh and Dzuaa Ehh and Nanae Ehh and Nuzeto Ehh and Hojee Ehh and Hogoni Ehh and Chachi Ehh and Memee Ehh and Mogii Ehh and Yujin Ehh and Ladd Ehh and Liinu Ehh and—"

The country name went on.

At this time, the male traveler thought about the silencing bullets he acquired from the previous country.

The gunpowder for firing the shot was in a small iron bag, and supposedly, the explosion would expand inside and be enough to propel the bullet, thus no sound from the discharge. The idea, at least, was unique.

I bought it ‘cause it seemed interesting, but the firepower was weak when I tried it out, so when would I be able to use it? the man wondered.

“—Rolan Ehh and Amaru Taa and Cassius Taa and Kiano Taa and Kohle Taa and Kohlen Taa and Ijimu Taa and Sazete Taa and Tatami Taa and Chijiru Taa and Teite Taa and Nibure Taa and Negami Taa and Nate Taa and Haazo Taa and Bobby Taa and Maama Taa and Emmy Taa and Yize Taa and Lofa Taa and Wasel Taa and Ward Taa and Wakio Taa and Web Key and Iini Key and Kaats Key and Baneme Key and Batro Key and Ero Key and Konre Key and Kone Key and Sheet Key and Sozzo Key and Tarets Key and Chizuru Key and Van Key and Teton Key and Tomoo Key and Hamim Key and Marze Key and Marin Key and Mufs Key and Mijika Key and Pho Key and Fin Key and Hotou Key and Magae Key and Rajin Key and Ranji Key and Rageru Key and Reem Key and Rikue Key and Ruden Key and Roato Key and Waaku Key and Wareb Key and Roton Key and Migumi Jee and Memeto Jee and Meren Jee and Ipumu Jee and Otomu Jee and Karen Jee and Korin Jee and Sanre Jee and Sand Jee and Shiee Jee and Shiera Jee and Soora Jee and Sukou Jee and Sonye Jee and Temib Jee and Tomas Jee and Nukio Jee and Note Jee and Hajire Jee and—”

Now the male traveler didn’t think of anything.

He had achieved a state of selflessness.

“—Photeh Jee and Hobuyu Jee and Muju Jee and Mugaa Jee and Majina Jee and Mofa Jee and Moaf Jee and Yaana Jee and Yakoji Jee and Yuuno Jee and and Yueba Jee and Yuyue Jee and Yoenu Jee and Yohimu Jee and Ragumi Jee and and Rimidzu Jee and Rupal Jee and Wanre Jee and Anzo Yaa and Kamue Yaa and Coats Yaa and Spats Yaa and Zion Yaa and Derenu Yaa and Garen Yaa and Kugeze Yaa and Kody Yaa and Umea Yaa and Sagan Yaa and Shibua Yaa and Taata Yaa and Toile Yaa and Ninie Yaa and Nekou Yaa and Nomue Yaa and Hajito Yaa and Foji Yaa and Maei Yaa and Muiji Yaa and Mugan Yaa and Mujin Yaa and Mejina Yaa and Meil Yaa and Mode Yaa and Yojin Yaa and Yott Yaa and Raffy Yaa and Rurue Yaa and Rubal Yaa and Rowon Yaa and Wakofu Yaa!”

The girl said it all marvelously.

When she did, the male traveler stood up—

“That was brilliant!”

—and sincerely praised her.

As he hid his relief that it was finally over—

“You remembered all of it! I’m impressed!”

The girl turned a little bashful.

“Oh, ah…it’s normal. Everyone can do it.”

“But still, it’s amazing. The name is astounding enough, but that everyone knows it just blows me away.”

So the man said, and started to fumble in his pockets for something that could serve as a reward for the girl—an empty bullet shell, for instance—but then thought it unjust to treat one person specially above the rest, and set the thought down.

“Thank you. Thank you very much.”

So words would have to do.

The guide interjected.

“Good job, Miss White Fish Lover. Let’s go back, now. ”

And so the girl bowed her head politely and trotted back to her place. The adults nearby patted her head.

“Quite amazing. I’m impressed.”

The female traveler turned to the guide as she said this .

The guide, a young person in the twenties—

“In our country, we teach them the name as soon as they can speak. If they don’t know it, it would be awkward not to be able to tell whoever asks for it.”

—said this with an air of pride.

In the eventide, the man inquired.

“And you don’t know the history behind the name?”

“Yes, we don’t. But, it’s comprised of our names. That will never change and we will be remembering it forever.”

This time, the woman opened her mouth.

“The girl earlier who was called Miss White Fish Lover—that is a nickname, isn’t it? It seems that you always hide your real name and go by aliases here.”

“Yes, we do. Well-deduced! I was wondering for a moment if I’d have to explain that.”

“There was another country I visited that had done the same thing.”

“Oh, so there are others! I’m relieved—I thought we were the only ones who did this. That’s wonderful to hear!”

So the guide said happily.

For a time afterwards, the people thought of nicknames for the two travelers for the duration of their stay.

Then when everyone argued back and forth over this and that—

In the end, the woman was “The Miss with Flowing Black Hair,” and the man, “Mister Luggage Carrier.”

“The Miss with Flowing Black Hair” and “Mister Luggage Carrier” stayed in the only guest house that night.

The next morning, they thanked their hosts for the fresh fish.

And some time past noon,

“Thank you very much. We’re grateful for the warm welcome and will be leaving now.”

“Thanks, everyone. This was a very wonderful country . —The name’s a tad difficult for me to remember, so what about ‘The Green Island’? —Well, then.”

The male and female travelers left the country with the long, long name.

And not soon after they departed.

Specifically, across the northern horizons, when the mountains fell away from view.

“Oh? —Someone’s there.”

The man in the driver’s seat lessened the accelerator.

The car that wasn’t going fast to begin with gradually dropped speed and stopped off to the side.

Other than a man in his mid-twenties, in a world only bound by the water line and earth line, there was nothing .

He wore a green jacket, and at his hip hung a 45-caliber automatic Persuader. He looked more like a traveler than a countryman of any kind.

Something that looked like his travel luggage, a dirty rucksack, lay by his feet.

That man was a little surprised, but he watched the car and a smile that showed no hostility spread across his face.

“Why would someone be out here?”

As the male traveler stated this, he laid his fingers on the Persuader on his left thigh.

The woman stated accurately,

“By boat, it seems. By the shore, are some burnt remains.”

He looked at that shore and certainly, there were the charred remnants of a small boat. It seemed that sand was thrown over the pile, but the wood cinders, a small abandoned engine, fuel tank, and more were fairly visible.

“That’s not possible…”

This, the male traveler whispered.

Basically, this man before them took his only means of transportation and abandoned it of his own will. Especially in this sort of place, such an action would weigh heavily on one’s life.

Still stunned at this strange action, the male traveler slowly alighted the car without surrendering caution, but did begin speaking in a cordial manner.

“Hello. Fancy meeting someone here.”

“Hello, traveler. I’m surprised, myself.”

The green-jacketed man thus returned, and—

“Don’t worry. I do have my reason for doing that. I won’t make any trouble for you. After all, I didn’t think I’d meet anyone here.”

—he cut to the chase as he eyed the boat cinders.

“This simplifies matters.”

The woman too alighted. The man in the green jacket said,

“May I ask a question?”

“Anything. I imagine it pertains to that country.”

At this sudden response,

“Simplifies matters, indeed.”

The man, deeply impressed, threw out his question.

“I believe you two just came from the country. So how did you find it? A peaceful coastline island, with about a thousand people, living a poor but nevertheless leisurely, peaceful, and happy life?”

The male traveler looked at the female,

“Yes, precisely. You know quite well.”

Upon which,

“Hahah!”

The green-jacketed man smirked, the sort that sounded like a scoff with a tinge of anger.

“I believe you’re heading over there—”

The man took up her words.

“I’m heading over, alright. Though on foot from here on. I’ll probably get there by nightfall. Right on schedule. ”

Destroying his own vehicle, close to night. The man’s words were definitely strange.

“What do you intend to do there?”

This, the woman inquired.

The man in green said honestly—very bluntly.

“As for that… —I’m going to massacre them.”

The male traveler said,

“Wow. That’s quite a task.”

In an intentionally joking tone.

The other man loosened his expression and said casually, “Not at all.” At length, “Did you know that on the summit, there’s a huge water reservoir that collects all the water from the rainy season? Around this time, that’s their only source of water. Just one bottle of the poison I got with me and everyone will die.”

So he said. Then he added,

“In practice, using a Persuader to kill a given number of people is more difficult, so I gave up on that.”

The woman agreed. Then,

“Now, ‘why?’”

Asked for the essential reason. The male traveler on the other side of the car, too.

“Yes, I’d very much like to hear.”

The man in the green jacket nodded as he spoke.

“Of course I’ll tell. —It’s for revenge.”

“Revenge against that country?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna get my revenge on them… I believe you don’t know anything I’m about to say. I doubt there’ ll be any reason why they would.” At length, “Long, long ago, fifteen years ago. The country exceeded 1500. Do you know what that means?”

When the green-jacketed man pitched that out,

“Pardon?”

The male traveler cocked his head,

“It means they exceeded the carrying capacity.”

As his companion replied instantly.

“Yes. Quite correct.”

“What does he mean, Master?”

He could not follow the dialogue and asked her.

“It means they have too many people on the land. It can barely hold 1000. And for some reason or another, they now have 500 too many,” she replied.

“Oh, I see! My, but that’s trouble…”

The green jacket waited for this to sink in the male traveler, then continued.

“There was some abnormal weather forty years before. Rainfall and fishing were abundant. Every one of those guides were idiots at that time, so they got ahead of themselves and broke the taboo established since the dawn of time that said, ‘The population can’t exceed a thousand and ten.’ Seems they wanted to expand and enrich the country. They wanted to engrave their names in history, I heard… But, if the fishing catch goes down, it’s all over. It’s already over.”

“So then…what happened?”

“What would you think? When they realized they’d have a drought and famine on their hands, those guides f-ing committed suicide. Leaving behind some 1500 people who had no idea what to do.”

“Then what ‘miracle’ happened?”

So the lady asked sarcastically. A savage smile rose on the green jacket’s face.

“Travelers came by… They came.”

They were a group of ten.

Split up in several trucks, came like you did. From the north.

Simply put, they just stopped by as they were moving south. They could very well have just passed us.

Then, when they came, the people flocked around them. They asked, Save us. They complained about their distress.

People were soon going to drop dead in the impending dry season.

Of the 1500, if 1000 live normally, 500 must die. Or else be forced to live year after year with everyone suffering from thirst and hunger.

Anything will do, just give us a solution, they pleaded.

And the leader of the travelers said this.

“Very well. We’ll resolve everything.”

Now, here’s a question. What kind of miracle did they bring?

A wonderful, wonderful, overnight miracle.

Those ten were people of great skill.

Skilled in the art of murder.

Those ten waited for the sun to set. Then set out to kill the residents.

But this was not completely random.

On top of researching name, age, and gender, they completely understood “which 500 to kill while still maintaining the population balance,” and made sure to kill the entire family so that no orphans or bereaved would remain.

Who knows the actual number killed…but it must’ve been close to 500.

Gunshots of Persuaders rang out all over the country, amidst the crying of birds.

They would break into the home and fire mercilessly, ensuring they got the last breath out of them.

Whomever was not meant to be killed was not killed.

But, those who were meant to be killed wouldn’t know until they were.

Even as the people understood their actions, they continued to shiver in fear.

Then dawn broke and those still alive were informed,

“It’s solved. Now you’ll be able to live.”

And they also said this.

“First, clean up the bodies. Before infection spreads, bury them deep in the shore and as far away as possible. Then forget all about them. Live happy lives without overpopulating.”

With that, the ten left.

Thus the country protected that order and even now, they continue to live in peace.

The End.

To which the male traveler suddenly posed a question.

“Huh…? Then why are you here? You know the story, so you’re clearly one of the survivors, and I doubt that country yields travelers.”

Though before the inquired could answer, the lady traveler said,

“He must have become the eleventh.”

“Oh…? Oh, I see.”

The male traveler pondered for a moment then suddenly got it. Then,

“Why?”

He again asked the green jacket.

“Luck. Pure luck. —I remember that moment very well. That night, I was ten. They came, and straight away they killed my father, my mother, my big sister, my two little sisters. Then the leader pointed the Persuader at me and pulled the trigger. Ka-chink! Somehow, no bullet came out.”

“Oh, my… Misfire is rare.”

“Very. I knew how much of a miracle it’d be if I learned how to shoot a Persuader. —The leader asked me , ‘Do you want to live?’ Even though I was soaked in my family’s blood, I answered, ‘I do. Take me with you.’ The taste of metal in my mouth. The incessant ringing in my ears. That’s how I became one of them—how I left my hometown hidden in their truck.”

“I see, I see.”

“Consequently, the country was saved. If my family was one of the survivors, who knows how happy they would have been. They were just unlucky. And I was the luckiest. So I traveled with them and lived a new life. Preferable to death. They accepted me as one of them, after all. Above all, the leader was kind.”

The lady traveler said,

“I see now. Then why is it that you go back now for revenge? It’s not as if she ordered you to.”

"…I never told you that the leader was a woman. How did you know?"

"Woman's intuition."

The man lost words for a moment, but at length shook his head once.

"I guess there are two reasons. One is, I lost that shelter. Half a year ago, my friends…those ten, were wanted for rampaging countries they passed and a terribly skilled tracker found them. To think they were killed so easily… The pursuer ended his job and left. And again, I was the only one left alive. The cause: I was away fetching water. Can you believe it?"

"A tragedy. —But, that's what luck is. Right?"

"True. But, I was pretty depressed. I thought I'd go off and die. —And the other reason came when I heard a rumor about the country. How peacefully they were living. How they completely forgot about the 500, how my fellow countrymen were living carefree, and then I decided, 'Alright, I'll kill them and then myself.' And somehow, I got here. I just need to take one more step. I didn't think I'd meet you two here and talk about this, though."

After which the male traveler mumbled "hmm" to himself.

"Now here's a dilemma… After all this talk, shouldn't I kill you to save that country…?"

"Well, what will you do? We both have Persuaders. Will you draw?"

To the man oozing murderous intent, the other one who expressed none of that spoke.

"But then you see, I don't know how powerful my opponent will be, and it's meaningless to get hurt when I don't need to. —In all honesty, I don't really want to do that."

"I figured you'd say that."

Observing the green jacket who laughed frivolously without paying any mind to the other two, the lady traveler asked, “You. Your name?”

Her male companion cocked his head, saying Why ask ?

The green jacket, too, was a little surprised. But then,

“Aah… Please let me tell you—the name of the man who will destroy that country. Once I get there, I can’t tell them, after all. —Mirai Tsoo.”

The lady nodded steadily.

“Mirai Tsoo, then.”

“Yeah—. It sounds weird, doesn’t it? In that country, last names are just sounds like ‘Tsoo’ or ‘Aa’ stretched out, but then that only makes twenty, so to avoid sharing the same full name, they always try to make the first name sound different for no apparent reason. But, I like this name that my family racked their brains to come up with. I’m glad it was the last thing they said.”

“I see. I understand well. Very well.”

Then the lady spoke to her companion over the car.

"Let's not have pointless quarrels."

Ro-ger, he replied.

The green jacket grabbed the luggage by his feet and heaved it up. Then,

"The people I will see next will all die, so I hope you two, at least, remember me. My name…is proof that I was alive. Please don't forget it."

"We shall. —And one bit of advice. When you enter, there's something I'd like you to pay attention to."

So the lady said.

"What is it?"

"Its name is different from the past. It would pay off to read it once before you go in."

"……? Alright. Well, I'm off. —Farewell, history's witnesses."

Then the green jacket shouldered his load, which probably held the poison.

He walked steadily. Straight ahead, north. The direction of the country.

Soon, he passed by the dilapidated yellow car and the two travelers.

“Goodbye, Mirai Tsoo.”

He gave a little wave at her words.

He never turned back. Footprints in the sand trailed after him.

Then when his figure shrank more and more, the lady whispered again.

“Goodbye. History’s witness.”

From the coastline island, the day after the dumpy yellow car left.

There, in that country.

The name changed a little.

There, in that country.

The population increased by one.

“Right about now, they must be scrambling to fix the tablet.”

“Did you say something, Master?”

“Nothing.”

The old yellow car ran on the shore.

The Country With No Borders —Asylum—

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, fluffy white fur. I always look like I'm smiling, but it does not necessarily mean that I am. I was just born that way.

Lord Shizu is my master. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, lost his hometown in some complicated way, and is currently traveling via buggy.

Our companion is Tea. She is a quiet girl who is fond of hand grenades, lost her hometown in some complicated way, and has been with us for a while.

This was after we crossed over to a new continent and kind of ran from the first country we saw.

Having clearly lost our way in the woods, we ran into an old lady, possibly a hermit. We were fortunate to acquire directions to the road leading to the next nearest country.

Thanked by Lord Shizu, the old lady parceled to him a warning.

“That place has all sorts of little nations who have feuds over their territories. I couldn’t stand it, so I left.”

And this old lady, once an advisor to one of these nations, left us with this and returned to her dilapidated hut.

As the buggy ran through a path deep in the mountainous forests, we went over one peak and came to a mountain basin. The countries the old lady told us of were here.

Only it was quite different from what we heard. There were no little nations engaging in feudal warfare amongst each other with the walls smashed together, but rather one huge country.

“Did they integrate? If so, it might be a stably hospitable place.”

Lord Shizu, who had been seeking such a location for some time, said this gleefully from the driver's seat. I, laying in the footspace of the passenger's seat,

"……."

And Tea, who was resting her chin on my head, descended the road together.

"Isn't it wonderful?! This wonderful system is so much more wonderful than anything else in the world!"

A female guide so declared before many people.

And we look at the scene dumbfounded, without a word.

It was a huge dome, the size of an indoor baseball stadium, filled with thousands of people.

Young and old, man and woman, all sorts of people, sitting and sleeping and reading and changing clothes and listening to their radios in this wide space.

Each space allotted to one person was about the size of a bed. Close enough to hear the person next to you breathe.

We saw this before. It looked like an emergency evacuation in a certain country where people who lost their homes in an earthquake were put together. Exactly the same.

Lord Shizu asked what on earth was this, and the guide replied in a proud, shrill voice.

“This country was unified long ago under the hand of a great man. Before that were long years of agonizing war.”

We knew that.

“And when we integrated into one country, he who became our first leader said, ‘This kind of situation must never happen again.’ He pondered what to do.”

Well, we kind of got that, too.

“Then he received a revelation! That ‘country borders’ were the cause of all this! That countries loudly insist on their own leaders whom everyone else ignores, which then ends up with us fighting! Think about it. In this world, on this planet, there never *was* such a thing as a border! Boundary lines mustn't exist!"

This is where things get new.

"And then! Our first leader decided never to have a ' border.' Basically, never permit anyone to 'possess' an area. Forbidden by the constitution!"

Lord Shizu screwed his brows together and asked the guide,

"Meaning…all the citizens live here, in this—"

"That's right, Traveler! This is their home, where no one has their own piece of land. All beneath this giant dome. Many more like these were built here. Government plans currently indicate that in the future, the domes will be integrated so that everyone will live under one roof."

"Even families? Even lovers?"

"Of course! Being this bunched together, there's no way we can consider making any exceptions. Of course, we can always put them near. They should at least have that much freedom.”

“Then…how is privacy in this country?”

The guide puffed up at Lord Shizu’s question.

“Of course not! That itself, the very concept of ‘my land,’ is the fundamental cause of this foolish warfare! It’s because we conceptualized the idea that people insisted on it, tried to preserve it, expand it, and there you have your endless formula for war. So let’s just never have it in the first place. Everything here is open—the living space, the bathroom, and the toilet. Now there’s no way the fighting can ever happen again.”

“About that constitution…”

“Right! Amendments to it have been strictly banned, so there’s no chance of our regressing to that foolish past. Offenders and rebels alike are punished severely.”

This guide who could not contain her joy continued babbling to a clouded Shizu.

“You desire emigration, don’t you?! So how is our country?! Won’t you become one of our wonderful citizens?! We’ll welcome you!”

And once Lord Shizu bought the necessities, he crossed the country walls again at dusk.

We departed from that “space” to the outside world.

In the deep forest, we await the close of the day.

One of the things Lord Shizu bought in that country was a little tent. It was one of the things postponed since the last country we visited did not have the kind we desired.

Lord Shizu speaks to Tea, who watched him wordlessly as he set up somewhat farther away from his own tent.

“This is yours. From now on, you sleep here.”

“…”

Tea’s eyes protested, but Lord Shizu did not yield.

So Tea yanked out all of the stakes, carried the tent to Lord Shizu’s, set it down, and restaked it.

“’ight.”

Bidding Lord Shizu good night, she disappeared into her tent.

“Good night, Tea.”

Lord Shizu did likewise into the neighboring one.

A forest where the cries of an owl rung low.

The last sight I saw before closing my eyes was the two tents, shoulder-to-shoulder in friendly fashion.

The Very Hard-to-Find Afterword

—Preface—

So here's another afterword.

Hello again from the author Keiichi Sigsawa who likes to mix myth and truth together.

Here the afterword starts again, which would normally look like more of the story. This time, in contrast to an easy-to-find afterword, I wrote and put this in a really hard place to find.

"Not…ANOTHER…afterWORD…"

You might say, but,

"You can't choose when to have your afterwords!"

So with two of these, just relax and read on.

And also, there actually isn't a third one.

Really.

Trust me.

So, I've given credit where credit was due in the "easy" one, so how about back-story on the production of this work? I think maybe writing about a matter only the author would know of in the form of an afterword will do.

There are no spoilers about the book here.

While there are none, it's perfectly fine to read the rest of the book and then come back here, too.

Then it makes this a real afterword. Even though the English subtitle says "preface."

About the main title.

It was around the time I wrote up the manuscript application. "Kino's Travels" was too simple, and I once thought, Maybe it sounds kinda dull.

I like its simplicity now, but at the time I really racked my brains.

"!"

Then the title I came up with was:

“Kinou no Kino no Tabi (Kino’s Travels of Yesterday)”

…….

No, I think the one right now was the correct choice…

In the end, I kept it simple and stuck the English “the Beautiful World” to the end.

I feel like applauding myself back then for thinking, “I shouldn’t do this.”

Everything related to misprints

Misprints—that is, misspellings even the author did not intend—happen on occasion.

I do check and proofread again and again, and best case scenario, that shouldn’t produce anything, but *something* appears since this is done by humans.

Right, right, like in the previous volume, Kino X…

In the good or bad but nevertheless very, very long " Country with its Prima Donna," there is a boy named Elias.

I took the name from a character in the Vietnam War film "Platoon," but when I wrote the story, I was extremely concerned with not making it the super-famous Aeris from Final Fantasy VII, the only RPG I've ever finished by myself.

But, mistakes do occur when one brandishes a pen. I fix the "Aeris" the moment I type it, I fix it again, and I check and check after the writing's complete and the book comes out, but—

I'm sorry.

(Maybe I should've stuck with "Bob"… But Bob's not really a character, and "Burns" is a surname.)

As a side note, misprints are sent to the editor before reprint, but other authors—self included—don't read the books word for word after it's been printed. Since I've read it plenty of times during revision.

So the first places to notice these things are BBS and blogs. That's what they're there for.

Everything related to typos

Other than misprints, there are also typos.

Forget about whether in Japanese such a word exists; it ’s when you hit the wrong key.

Really, you feel that this word shouldn’t have ended that way, but then you end up putting the wrong suffix on it a lot of the time.

But sometimes, that wrong letter inspires some brilliant, sparkling idea, and consequently, I keep it.

So in the end, it’s alright. Hooray.

Even now, some things I don’t recognize as errors get out in the world.

Some tricks of the angels get in there. A little.

It’s not heavenly thinking up of character names. But it’s fun.

There aren’t very many sub characters with names.

In order to not set one up, I purposely use “resident,” “bearded man,” and “entry guard,” and go on writing without it looking awkward.

Therefore, important, named sub characters who do appear from time to time enjoy themselves and run into conflicts and think of twisted things—they have a certain aura about them. When I go look names up, it can get quite interesting. (Those types of dictionaries really come in handy.)

Although, the aforementioned “Prima Donna” has names like “Yuan,” “Cain,” and “Lob” that I personally came up with.

Huh? The protagonist-like Master and her partner’s names haven’t come up yet?

Come to think of it, oh, yeah.

Actually, it’s just that her name hasn’t come up yet; I’ve got a name for her (no surname yet, though). It’s been around since she first appeared in Kino II. I just didn’t put it out yet. Whether I will commit it to paper or not is a mystery.

On the other hand, her partner’s name is…uh…well…

Note: Sigsawa does not hate him. Just so you know.

The Persuader’s “name” never comes up.

While on one hand, a Persuader—that is, a firearm—in short, a gun—may have a clearly designated model, I won’t name it. (This is the same case with the “Allison” and “Lilia and Treis” series, neither of which take place on Earth.)

There I can describe the gun’s features easily, and if the people understand what I’m writing, all the better.

If I were to be detailed about the guns, the editor would issue the command to cut it, so I have to be careful not to go overboard. Must suppress, must suppress. But that reaction ended up making “School Kino” something else entirely.

Basically, I put in whatever gun I just happen to like.

Whenever I have a toy gun or air gun in hand, I pose and wave it around and shoot ‘em at all dangerous persons in the room. Please do not do this at home.

A thirty-something-old man going into an empty, lit room with a toy gun in hand,

“Whew…all clear.”

And saying that so seriously is something to wonder.

So, one exception to this choice was Volume IX’s “ Killing Country,” where Master has a Luger P08 on her hip. This one, I remembered from a handshake session someplace, where someone said to me, “Please put it in!” so I put it in.

So, yeah, that happens. It’s happened, but don’t expect it to happen again, sorry.

Even if someone were to yell,

“Harquebus!”

I wouldn’t know what to do.

And from time to time, I'll also put in a custom gun, so you guys who like spotting all the firearms in stories, watch out for that.

And Persuaders are really "Pers."

When I type in word-processing software, long words or phrases that appear frequently enough get added to the dictionary in a shorter form, which is quite convenient. On my PC, I just need to type in "Pers," hit the right-menu key, and then choose the word from the list.

1. Persuader

2. Persuader (Note: Firearm)

3. Hand Persuader (Note: Persuader is a firearm; in this case, a pistol.)

Very handy. Very, very handy.

But if I get all used to it, then in normal conversation, it would go like, "You know, Kino's Pers is—"

So gotta be careful.

Even if Sigsawa uses unintelligible words, please kindly watch over him.

So, what does Kino travel with?

When I first wrote up "Kino's Travels," which came out of my own natural fondness for traveling,

"Should I make a list of Kino's supplies…?"

I've often thought about that.

If I do make detailed notes about what she carries, where she straps it, and the like, it would probably make writing easier for me.

But then I gave it up.

If you were to ask me why—

It’s because I’m the sort of human who “can’t decrease one’s luggage.”

When I go traveling, I say, “I’ll probably need this, maybe that too, I’ll probably feel uneasy without this one,” and before I know it, I’ve amassed all sorts of things, and it gets heavy.

And when I come back, I’ve not used any of those things, or else I happily bought some souvenir from wherever I went. That always happens.

Every time, I swear to myself to simplify my luggage, but it just happens again…

So, the day I ever come up with a complete list of Kino’s travel items is—

The day she doesn’t have to lug everything on Hermes.

About fan works.

Might be a surprise, but I welcome the idea of my works being the basis of fan works.

It expresses the gratitude of the people who like it so much and it also has that sense of energy exerted in “ putting out their own work.”

Even if it were a parody of heretofore unprecedented proportions (though I’ve done a similar thing with “ School Kino,” so to speak…) or an 18+ work that would flood the ground with one’s nosebleed, it’s all the same.

Only, I try best as I can not to read them.

The reason being, I fear the one in ten thousand—no, ten million—will prompt me to take the story line for myself.

Nevertheless, good luck, everyone.

There will be a time when that imagination and creativity will come in handy.

And so this afterword shall end abruptly here.

「キノの旅」イラスト担当

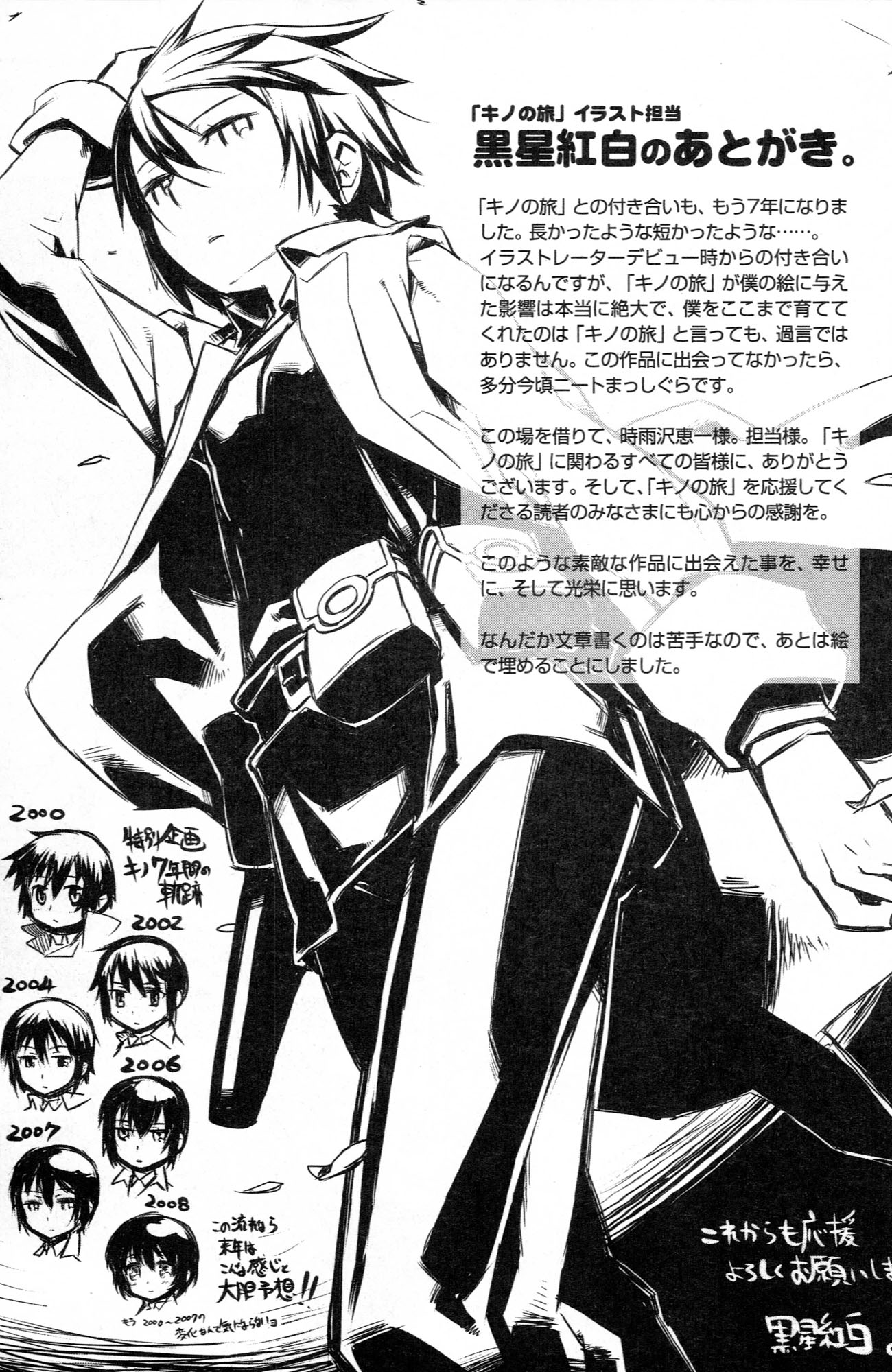
黒星紅白のあとがき。

「キノの旅」との付き合いも、もう7年になりました。長かったような短かったような……。イラストレーターデビュー時からの付き合いになるんですが、「キノの旅」が僕の絵に与えた影響は本当に絶大で、僕をここまで育ててくれたのは「キノの旅」と言っても、過言ではありません。この作品に出会ってなかったら、多分今頃ニートまっしぐらです。

この場を借りて、時雨沢恵一様。担当様。「キノの旅」に関わるすべての皆様に、ありがとうございます。そして、「キノの旅」を応援してくださる読者のみなさまにも心からの感謝を。

このような素敵な作品に出会えた事を、幸せに、そして光栄に思います。

なんだか文章書くのは苦手なので、あとは絵で埋めることにしました。


2000
特別企画
キノ7年間の軌跡
2002
2004
2006
2007
2008
この流れなら
来年は
こんな感じと
大胆予想!!
もう2000~2007の
変化なんて気にならないヨ
これからも応援
よろしくお願いしま
黒星紅白。

The Country With the School — Assignment

Along a forested path rode a Motorrad, meaning both a two-wheeled vehicle and a vehicle unable to fly. On either side of the back wheel hanged two black boxes, and on the top rested a pipe-frame carrier, though nothing was loaded in either.

The motorrad's driver was a young person, apparently in the early teens, with short dark hair. The rider wore a hat that covered her collar and ears, wore goggles over her eyes, and a dusty black leather jacket.

A fat leather belt coiled about the driver's waist, and at her right thigh, snug in its holster, waited a revolver, an expensive model known throughout the land as a Persuader.

At the front of the rider's body, one more Persuader, heavily modified to fire rat-shot, hung from a strap. Its long smoothbore barrel and the perforated heat sink atop particularly stood out.

Under the blue sky, through the verdant forest, and with the sun shining at its right hand side, the motorrad raised a cloud of dust as it sped along. The forest path ran straight, lending itself to easy visibility and high speeds, and the driver held the throttle open accordingly. Occasionally she would readjust the slipping Persuader at her front.

“Hey, Kino.”

The Motorrad often spoke to its driver, a fact that troubled its driver not in the least. The rider, Kino, answered, “if you’re going to complain about the speed, don’t bother. We need to get used to going fast and for long hours.”

“No, that’s all fine with me. Where are we going today ? Shopping?”

“Didn’t I say?” Kino slowed down. They lurched awkwardly as their speed decreased and the rider countered as well as she could. Once the engine quieted down, Kino said, “school.”

“School?”

“Yep. I’m going to a certain school in this country we’ re headed to. For five days.”

“Oh. Uhm... why?”

"Master told me there're skills taught there no other school teaches. It's a great opportunity, so go, she said. If it's an opportunity to become stronger, I'll do anything."

"Hmm. So that's how it is."

"That's why the next coupla days, we're going to be moving fast and far."

"Speaking as a motorrad, that's fine. The weather this time of year is very nice."

"And it makes good driving practice." So saying, Kino twisted the accelerator again. Hermes tore off over the hard-packed earth.

As soon as they'd left the forest behind, tall walls greeted them. The walls loomed gray and large, and surrounded the country in their embrace. It was well before noon. The sun was climbing to its zenith and warmed the earth as it did so. Kino stopped Hermes before a rifle-armed sentry at the front of the gate. She popped down the kickstand and removed her goggles.

"Good morning. Nice to meet you," Kino said with slightly exaggerated friendliness and the mandatory smile. “I’m Kino. This is my partner, Hermes. Please allow us in.” Her eyes caught a second, better concealed guard and gave him a nod as well.

Having given proper greetings to these two sentinels, Kino walked to the bag on the back wheel and produced a letter.

The elder guard, a man well into his fifties, took this letter. He opened it, read it, and then—

“Alright, understood. Come on in. However, we have very strict rules regarding Persuaders. We’ll have to hold them until you leave.”

“Understood,” Kino assented, hiding her reluctance. She removed the modified Persuader from its holster and ejected nine rounds. They and the revolver at her hip whose barrel, cylinder, and grip she quickly and expertly disassembled, she placed in the cardboard box offered by the sentries.

“You have an impressive model. I apologise for any inconvenience, but in one part of our vast country, terrorists unhappy with the government are running rampant. It’s marked on the map, be careful not to approach it. Any other location should be fine. —Oh!

There are speed limits posted too. I’m afraid the fine is considerable.”

“Understood, and thank you.” Kino pushed Hermes through the gates.

After seeing off the vehicle and the rider, the younger sentryman turned to his superior. “Uh…are you sure?”

“What... about him?”

“Who is that boy?” Kino had taken great care to present the appearance of a compact young man.

“Who knows? First time I’ve met him.”

The subordinate said nothing.

“He had an introduction letter from that old lady. Can’t reject that.”

“By ‘that old lady,’ you mean the one who lives in that forest…the one everyone is scared of?”

“Who else?”

“Was he her grandson, maybe?”

“Far as I know, she’s always lived alone. Rumour says she picked him up while the kid was lost in the woods.”

“What’s up with that…? Besides, what kind of lady is she, anyway?”

“Kid, there’s something I heard the captain say some time ago. And he heard it from the regimental commander, who heard it directly from the general. ‘If you’d like to live a long life, don’t look into it. Just don’t.’ Not patronizing you, understand. Just for your own sake I’m tellin’ you.”

“Huh! Okay.”

“I wonder what’s for dinner today.”

The younger man noted the abrupt change in subject and shrugged. “Beats me. Hope it’s fish.”

* * *

Within the curving walls of the country, woods and fields stretched to the horizons. Sparse houses dotted the green landscape here and there. Kino spread out the map the sentries had given her, took a note from her jacket, compared the two, then concluded, “okay. We go straight for a while, and then left at the second intersection. A little bit further down there'll be a small town. That's our destination." Kino flipped the two papers over and showed them to Hermes.

After a moment, "Yup. No mistake about it."

Kino pocketed the map and note and then Hermes sped her on their way.

"Okay, hello everyone. Today, we'll be having a new student in our class. This here's Kino. Kino, this is our class, altogether, twelve people. They're about the same age as you, a few are older. Everyone, say 'hi.'"

"Hello," the young woman answered, keeping her voice low and even and hoping that and her short hair would do the trick. "My name is Kino."

"I think you can all guess, but Kino wasn't born or raised here. There's a big forest outside this country, right? She lives with an old granny there who takes care of her. But that's something we all should consider confidential. Let's get along and work hard together. Just because Kino doesn't look like you doesn't mean you should shun her. Every person lined up alongside you is your comrade. Clear? Okay, then, let's begin. Kino, please take the desk and chair over there. Work hard to catch up to us, okay?”

“Oh yes. My regards, all. I’ll do my best.”

If it’s an opportunity to become stronger...

...I’ll do anything.

The sun slanted through the forest that Kino and Hermes drove through, shadows following to their left. Just as before, the rat-shot Persuader was strapped to the front of her body, and as before, she drove very fast. The sound of the shrill motor re-echoed through the trees.

“So! How was school today?” Hermes shouted over the noise. Hearing no reply, he repeated the question.

“Huh? —Ah! Yeah, it was fun!” Kino bellowed her reply, too. At the speeds she was driving, the trees and leaves at either side blurred by.

“What’d you learn?”

“How to make stuff!”

“What kind?” asked Hermes. So Kino elaborated on the “stuff.”

“Huh. That sounds pretty fun.”

“It was fun. Pretty interesting. The people in the class weren’t exactly open, so I felt kinda left out, but… I think that’s just because I was nervous. Everyone worked diligently and listened to the teacher, and during a brief recess we all got along fine. They think hard, kinda brood over their futures. Probably because they’re country-folk.”

“Uhm hm. And the teacher?”

“She’s a good person! Still twenty, blonde hair, she’s pretty. Very kind. She laid everything out for me today. She doesn’t talk too fast and it’s easy to follow her. There were a lot of terms I didn’t know that I had to ask about, but she explained them to me without getting frustrated. So I understood everything so far.”

“Hmm.”

“When Master told me to go to school so suddenly, I wondered why. But it’s a lot more fun than I expected.”

"That's wonderful! Your long-suffering chauffeur, however, was nothing but bored. There was a wild dog who tried to mark my tires, for crying out loud."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean it was about to piss on me! Y'see, that's why I hate dogs. Fortunately it whimpered and ran off when I yelled at it."

"If you're too loud, you're going to be noticed, you know."

"Relax! I yelled so high nothing human would be able to hear me."

"…Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'll explain some other time, maybe. It'll be nice to teach something to you."

"You and Master and the teacher all know so much. There's still so much I don't know."

"That's alright. You're young, you've got time."

“Well, yeah. We’re going back tomorrow and the day after that. The class will end in five days, as planned So, until then.”

“Well, I prefer running along the road to sleeping in the woods all day.”

“When we get back, I’ll tell Master about what I learned. Oh! The teacher told me something amazing about Master.”

“What?”

“She teaches everything that she knows, and whatever she doesn’t know, she sets out to learn it, and then teaches whoever is willing to learn. So she learn exactly what she doesn’t know. Isn’t that clever?”

“I see... I think. But to think there was a school in this country that taught — this! I’m a bit surprised. Hey, learning for its own sake is fine and well, but is what you ’re learning practical?”

“I wonder. I really don’t know. But I remember when I first started to learn the alphabet I thought, ‘Is this ever going to be useful? Rather than learn all this, I want to go play outside, I want to learn how to climb a tree.’ But now, I don’t think that anymore. Master’s taught me several alphabets, and that allows me to read lots of interesting books. So in the same way, I suppose what I’ m learning now will be useful, someday.”

“I see, although motorrads don’t really have to know how to read for their whole lifetime.”

“Hermes, what’s a Motorad’s lifetime like?”

“Ha! Now that’s tough to explain.”

Then the fast-cruising Kino and Hermes turned at a crossroads in the forest. After following the road for some time, a log cabin appeared. One part of the forest had been cultivated into vegetable fields, and from the cabin’s chimney, smoke trailed, fortelling a hot meal. Kino cut her speed and stopped Hermes in front of the log cabin.

A thin old woman soon appeared from the house. She wore an apron, and her graying golden hair tied back. Beside her hip, a short-barreled revolver dangled in its holster.

“Welcome back, Kino.”

“Hello, Master,” Kino smiled, for real this time.

The old woman called Master stepped down from the wooden deck onto the road and asked Kino if she’d used her rat-shot rounds. Kino shook her head.

“Then go around to the field and try shooting the scarecrows.”

“Okay!” Kino answered enthusiastically and took off with Hermes. After moving a little ahead, her hand squeezed the brakes for Hermes’s back wheel. The vehicle angled sharply and skidded, spinning around to face the other direction.

“Let’s go, Hermes.”

“Be gentle with me.”

Kino took off with Hermes. She accelerated fast and by intervals shifted the gears. As they passed the front of the log cabin, Kino let both hands go. Still straddling Hermes and letting the momentum push them on, she yanked the modified Persuader from its holster and popped the safety. Then she leaned slightly, turning them to the left.

At the far end of the field, just bordering the forest, stood five scarecrows built of wood. Each wore a metal pan like an apron.

Kino fired. The tiny pellets blasted outward and struck the scarecrows, each in turn, sparks and shrill sounds ringing from the metal plates.

Kino skillfully compensated for the recoil and quickly pump the expended shells with her left hand as she fired. Rumbling echoes rippled through the forest. A flock of birds nearby flapped away.

By the time she’d crossed the field Kino had fired five shots, all of which struck the scarecrow in places that would have been fatal to humans.

Kino put her hands back on the handlebars and quickly hit the brakes, turning Hermes around once more . She accelerated again, this time aiming to the right and spinning around.

She fired again, and her remaining four rounds hit four of the scarecrows. The last shell ejected and joined its eight counterparts on the ground.

“Excellent,” the old woman commented, pleased, when Kino returned to the front of the house. “You’ve become good.”

Kino stopped Hermes and killed the engine. She let down the kickstand and hopped off.

“How was school, Kino?”

“It was fun,” Kino replied quickly.

“Then let’s have dinner. Sausage stew tonight.”

Hermes noted Kino’s grin at the mention of the stew. “ No, I ain’t envious at all,” he muttered quietly to himself.

The next morning. The second day of class.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Granted permission by the guard, Kino and Hermes entered the gate.

“That’s right. Any questions up until now?” the teacher asked. “Any? Well then, everyone knows the fundamentals, now. I’m glad I have so many bright students. Nothing good comes from flattering my students, you’re thinking? True enough.”

She knelt down beside Kino’s workspace. “Kino, you’re learning just about as fast as everyone else, if not faster. At first, I was worried that you might fall behind, but that’s not the case. You’re doing very well.”

“Thank you.”

“This class has had twelve excellent pupils for some time, but now we have a thirteenth, don’t we?” she said to the group. “That’s all for today. Next class will be day after tomorrow. I recommend you spend your day off reviewing your notes, because we’ll be starting slightly more complicated tasks next time. Bye, everyone. Careful on your way back—”

And two days later...

“Hey, here you are again.”

Granted permission by the guard, Kino and Hermes entered the gate.

“Everyone, the most important thing about construction isn’t the dexterity of your hands. We aren’t here to make wristwatches, you hear? More important than that -- in fact the most important thing of all -- from start to finish, make the product accurately. Properly-made objects that work reflect well upon the person who made them. It’s pointless to assemble objects that have no real-life application. So, while you shouldn’t make them, in class it’s okay. If something goes wrong, I’ ll help you think through why it didn’t work. Then all you have to do is make sure you don’t repeat the same mistake the next time you build it. Now, let’s run a check of everyone’s work.”

She stepped from one student’s workspace to the other . “Oh, that’s good. Very well-made. This too. Wonderful, you followed exactly what I said. Oh, if you don’t pass the cord through here, it’s going to snag. But other than that, looking good. We’ll fix that later. Mm-hm, very good. Kino’s… ah, you have some parts you need to fix. Now this part shouldn’t be visible from the outside. Let’s hide it. And hide the seam, too. You can let this tip out, so let’s hide that for now, too. Don’t worry, it’s fine. If you fix these parts, yours will also work, Kino. No need to look so worried.”

“Teacher, I have a question.”

“Yes, Kino?”

“About the way you loop this cord, can you thread it through the top, too?”

“Good question. That’s a case-by-case basis. The issue would depend on where you would wear it on your body. If you were to put it over your belly, then yes, thread it through the top. For your back, through the bottom.”

“I see. Got it. Thank you very much.”

“Any other questions? —Oh! Everyone’s making excellent progress! It seems like your diligence is rubbing off on everyone, Kino.”

“So yeah, I got praised by her.”

“That’s great, Kino.”

“I’ll be going again tomorrow. After two more times, it’s done!”

“That’s wonderful. When you’re done, take it home and show me, okay?”

“Okay.”

For those two days, Kino rode to school on Hermes,

“Kino, do your best,” Hermes cheered.

And Kino was praised by her teacher.

“You wanna piece of me? Then come get it!” Hermes roared at a dog.

“Everyone? Class is finally over! I’m very proud of all your efforts.” Kino stood in the classroom she’d commuted to for five days. In the remodeled room nestled in this otherwise old building, the concrete pillars were chipped here and there, and the windows had no glass but, rather, were boarded up. Though many bare light bulbs dangled, it was still dim. Counting Kino, thirteen boys and girls sat in chairs and desks that bore obvious scars of frequent repair. With the exception of Kino, who wore a plain white shirt, the others wore patched and stitched clothes.

In front of every individual, atop their desks, lay a bag. Leather and cloth, backpack and cross-shoulder and handbag, all manner of bags. Their slightly bulgy appearance suggested something solid inside them.

These were undoubtedly not top-of-the-line bags, but they all exuded an aura of handmade care, diligently put-together.

Before Kino rested a light beige cross-shoulder bag. It too had a distinct bulge, about the size of a large lunch box.

“We’ve finally done it, haven’t we? Here we are, with not one failure in sight. There’s nothing left for me to teach you. The last thing to do is to take the bag home and show it to your mother and father, brother or sister —show it to everyone in the world! They’ll definitely love it!” In front of the sewing machine on the teacher’s desk, the beautiful woman with her golden hair tied back declaimed proudly. Every pupil broke into a smile. “Well , now we must part ways, but I trust that every one of you will fulfill your purpose wonderfully!”

A firm assent answered her voice.

“One last point. This doesn’t directly have to do with the class, but there’s something else I’d like you to learn. Please listen.”

Twenty-six eyes focused on the teacher’s face. She slowly met every gaze, and then... “we wonder, what is the most important thing that leads to success in life? I personally believe that it’s your conviction. The power to accomplish what you want to do, what you set your mind on. That is vital to your life. You must base all your actions on this conviction. When you do, someone is bound to ask you, ‘Is that the right thing to do?’ But, you mustn’t falter. Your heart must not waver. You mustn’t let it waver. Hold fast to your goals and race forward. Until now, I’ve told you not to lie in class, haven’t I? But after this, when you go into the outside world and you begin to act upon your convictions, it’s okay to lie. Above all, hold fast to your beliefs. Even if it will grind your soul to bits, stand firm and fight!”

The teacher trembled a little with passion as she spoke. Finally she smiled, with a wide smile like a flower in full bloom,

“I know that you can do it. Everyone here can do it. Class, you have graduated. Congratulations.”

Soon, Kino put the light beige shoulder bag into the box at Hermes’s back wheel.

“I’m back, Master.”

And she returned to the log cabin in the forest.

“I’ve done it, Master!” She stood at the threshold, heralded by the cry of forest birds and framed by a red sky.

The old lady saw the bag, looked inside, and said, “I see. Interesting. They use this sort of timber and construction these days, don’t they?”

Kino then showed it to Hermes, who was just as impressed.

The next day, before noon.

“Then let’s begin. Kino, carry the bag.”

“Yes, Master. I have it here.”

Kino and the old lady carefully dismantled the device and checked every element of its construction.

“Good. This makes for a very useful reference. You’ve done well. It’s put together neatly. We’ve even got the details diagrammed. Let’s try putting it back together.”

“Sure!”

Soon everything was set back in place as if it had never been taken apart.

That noon.

Two people and a vehicle entered the forest away from the house.

Kino hung that beige bag on a branch connected to a tree trunk. The original cord leading out from the bag was tied to another, longer string. And at the other end of that thread stood the old lady and Hermes, hidden behind a thick tree trunk.

“Ready, Master?”

“Yes, any time.”

“Hermes?”

“I’m fine too.”

“Here goes, then. I hope it goes well!”

Kino yanked hard on the string. A short snap could be heard as the string left the bag. The bag made a hissing sound as white smoke poured from its seams for two seconds.

And then it exploded!

The high-power military bomb detonated. The nails set around it shot off in all directions and stabbed into the hearts of neighboring trees. The blast wove through the forest and whipped up fallen leaves.

The tree from which the bag had hanged from had most of its trunk gouged out by the bomb. As the black smoke cleared, it crumbled and collapsed into the woods.

Pounding the forest, the echoes of detonation shook the earth, threw avians into a squawking panic, and faded off into the sky.

“Success! It exploded perfectly,” The old lady told the excited Kino and Hermes as she pulled the plugs from her ears.

“That was awesome!” Hermes added.

“Then we ought to tell your teacher, shouldn’t we? How about visiting town again tomorrow? I have things I want you to buy, so you can do that, too.”

I suppose what I’m learning now will be useful, someday.

Kino and Hermes again left the house early and covered the familiar distance quickly, arriving at the gates just before noon. Just like before, they checked in with the guards and entered the little town.

Soon they reached the heart of the low, clustered buildings and turned the corner of the back road.

“Oh, the school’s…!” Kino stammered.

“Whoa...!” Hermes said.

A little ahead of them, the school building was being destroyed. An enormous bulldozer trampelled the growing pile of rubble and mercilessly rammed the building.

Kino and Hermes continued from the back road and halted in front of the rubble. It was surrounded by many armed policemen. Squadcars and trucks were parked on the wide thoroughfare, and behind the caution tape, residents watched the scene with gloomy expressions.

They glimpsed Kino and Hermes and brightened up a little, then once again feigned their apathetic countenances.

“A young, blonde woman stood in front of the crumbling building, her back to the crowd. She was surrounded by burly policemen, her hands cuffed behind her. Quiet and tranquil, she gazed at the dying building.

“That’s… your teacher,” whispered Kino to Hermes.

“I wonder what happened.”

“Should we ask?”

Kino pushed Hermes up to the tape and spoke with a young policeman.

“Hm? You must not be from around these parts. Best you leave this town soon. Wouldn’t blame ya.” He answered her query, paying little attention to the residents in their immediate vicinity.

“The police crushed one of the terrorist cells,” he continued. “This dump of a town was a hideout. It’s such a poor place here, it bred a low-down group who thought they could overthrow the government with their dirty tricks.”

Kino pointed to the back of her teacher. “Um, who’s that pretty woman you’ve caught there?”

“Her? Might not look like it, but she’s one of those terrorists.”

“Huh. What was she caught for?”

“You wouldn’t believe it…” the policeman answered with a sour face. “She was running a ‘school’ in this crummy building. Was teachin’ little boys and girls your age how to make high-power, hidden bombs.”

“Hmmm. And then?”

“And then… yesterday, those kids pretended to go on a trip to the government district in the heart of the capitol . And…they set off the bombs in crowded buildings and marketplaces. All twelve. Suicide bombers, they’re called .”

“Why? Did they think life sucked or something?”

“Who knows! They were raised by terrorists, so who knows what went on in their heads. Crazy loons who think dying is part of their ‘faith.’ It’s obvious they were encouraged by their parents, relatives and siblings. Now we have hundred of casualties, everone howling in rage — what bastards these terrorists are! Anyway, we pinpointed this building and apprehended her."

"So that's how it is," Kino replied indifferently.

"She'll be executed soon. If we just put her in prison, there'll be other terrorists demanding we let her go, so we shoot 'em soon as we get 'em."

The building lay completely reduced to rubble. The roar of the bulldozer faded and died. The police ordered the blonde woman to climb into the black truck parked off to the side. The teacher turned her eyes to the residents.

She turned, her eyes met Kino's, and she slowly smiled .

The young officer, watching his colleagues take the terrorist, sharply asked Kino, "Do you know her?"

She replied firmly, in a voice even the teacher could hear. "No. How could I?"

Quietly and with a satisfied smile, the teacher let herself be pushed by the policemen into the windowless truck, and presently disappeared from everyone’s sight.

Officers stood guard with Persuaders. After a brief while, an officer wearing a black mask appeared. In his hands was a large caliber rifle. He loaded one large bullet into the gun, aimed inside the truck, whose door was still open.

He fired.

The oppressive sound reverberated from the buildings.

“Withdraw!”

The police returned to their respective vehicles. The bulldozer leading the line, the cars and trucks left the city .

The black truck was the last to leave. A body was thrown out from the back. Its face was gone, gouged out. The blonde, bloodied hair floated in the air before hitting the ground.

After the line of cars left, the people gathered about the corpse. They gently covered the absent face and folded the corpse's hands over its breasts.

And then, together, they cheered their hero. The town shook with their shouts.

But the motorrad and its driver were already gone.

...all you have to do...

...is make sure you don't repeat the same mistake the next time.

A Tale of Roads —Passage—

There was a summer forest.

A hilly area dense with trees and grass with lumps stretching across the earth painted the world in green.

Perfectly white clouds floated in the sky and the sun shone brilliantly on the earth.

In this forest, on a certain narrow road, a motorad (note: a two-wheeled vehicle, meaning it doesn't fly) wheezed by.

This road in the forest was narrow and wildly overgrown. The width would allow a vehicle to pass, with some effort. The surface was muddy, uneven. Tree branches stretched overhead, and though it was morning , it was very dim.

The motorad, its front wheel shooting up everywhere in the ditch and its back wheel racing from being stuck in the mud, proceeded very sluggishly. The headlights shuddered every which way.

Black boxes lay on both sides of its back wheel, and on its carrier were strapped a carrying bag and a sleeping bag. The wheels and body of the motorad itself were completely dirtied in mud.

The driver was a young human. About the mid-teens. Large eyes, an intrepid face.

She wore a furred cap, the earflaps were pushed up by the band on her goggles which did not cover her eyes but were on her cap.

She wore a black vest on top of a white shirt not dirtied by all the mud thrown up, and had a wide belt strapped on her. By her right thigh was a Hand Persuader in its holster. (Note: A Persuader is a firearm; in this case, it is a pistol.)

“It’s an awful road… This is the worst thing ever…”

This, the driver groaned.

“I got gypped… ‘There’s an unbelievably good road up ahead, just to tell you,’ my ass…”

The back wheel slipped in mud again and the driver panicked, readjusting her grip on the handles. Sweat dripped from her forehead on the tank.

“Hang in there, Kino. Look, we just have a little more to go before we’re out of the forest.”

So said the motorad as if it had nothing to do with the present issue. Ahead on the road, the end of the forest tunnel shone white and dazzling.

The driver named Kino said,

“But Hermes, there’s no guarantee that the road from there on will be—oof…better than this one.”

Putting up a leg, she tried desperately to regain her balance.

“If the sun hits it and dries it up, it would make the situation better. Wanna take a break?”

So said the motorad named Hermes.

“Good idea…it’s a beautiful forest after all, so it’d be nice to relax and admire it…”

So smiled she.

“Pretty mad, aren’t you, Kino.”

“What…is this?”

“Wow, amazing. Yup, definitely amazing.”

Even Hermes, resting on its sidestand, sounded impressed.

There was a wide road.

The forest was cleared, the roots dug out, the earth leveled, wide enough for a large truck to comfortably drive by—a truly excellent road.

After the clearing the treacherous path back in the woods, Kino and Hermes stopped and saw this one. Mud tracks from Hermes’s tires stuck to the road.

“How can a road fit for a country be here…? Hermes, I ’m not dreaming, am I?”

“You’re fine. Though even then, I’m surprised. Definitely a shocker. Could even call this a highway.”

Kino turned around and observed.

This path gently sloped along the hills, and as it ascended and descended, it ran on for as far as the eye could see.

Kino traversed the width of the road as she observed, stooping down once and removing her gloves, touching the hot surface.

“Some sort of heavy roller packed and leveled the earth very well. It looks easy to drive on…”

“Did you notice, Kino? They mixed something in the earth before they packed it. Besides, it’s sort of raised in the middle.”

“Huh? Why?”

Kino asked as she stood up.

“When it rains, the runoff can flow to the left and right . Look at the sides; you can see they dug ditches there, which the trees hold very tightly. It allows the water to flow into the forest from different spots, which is a good a way for the road to avoid weathering from rain. There are probably tunnels further along that go underneath and redirect the flow of water from the hilltops.”

After listening to Hermes’s explanation, Kino again regarded the road impressively.

“But Kino, we’re not in any country yet. I can’t think of any reason at all why someone would put in the time and labor to make such an excellent road.”

As Hermes pondered,

“But for me, it’s a huge lifesaver!”

Kino screamed this to the blue sky.

After that, Kino traveled down the road west.

At intervals, signs appeared along the road.

Numbers of days signified information like how long it would take to get to this next country if you were rushing with an engine vehicle, how long if you drove leisurely, how long at a fast horse gallop, how long for a carriage, how long for a bicycle, and how long on foot.

The road smoothly wove through the hilly area, up and down, going on and on and on.

The facilities for the gutters were fit snugly, and on the side near a precipice, there were logs established to prevent vehicles from falling off.

On both sloping sides of the road, there were also logs driven into the ground in the form of pickets and fences, intended to prevent landslides during the rainy season, and further on, it appeared that grass and all sorts of trees were planted into the ground. By the looks of it, mere days passed since this construction finished.

A bridge spanned the river as if it was the most natural thing in the world. It looked incredibly sturdy, composed of lavishly piled logs that were cut down for the road during the deforestation process.

Additionally, there was a sign dictating how to fix the bridge should it become damaged, with logs prepared by the side.

There was a path with a stairway for water-gathering purposes, as well as a clearing by the side for anyone who wished to camp out.

“They’re so gracious! What a wonderful road!”

An impressed Kino raced Hermes fast down the otherwise lonely road. The mud on the vehicle gradually dried up, at intervals crumbling off and flying to the back .

Then, going five times faster than in that muddy ditch in the woods, some time before noon,

“Amazing. We’re almost there. It’s just as the sign said .”

Kino caught sight of tall walls.

The path went straight on to the gate.

What lay there was a country cosily nestled in a basin amongst the hills.

Kino sought permission to enter the country for three days and was received.

While settling the entry formalities, Kino expressed her awe of the road to the guard.

“Did the people in this country make it?”

“Not at all,”

The guard promptly replied.

“It would be faster if you were to ask the builders themselves than for me to explain it.”

“The builders, then? That means there is a group responsible for that road, correct?”

“Yes. You’re in great luck. They were planning to stay until today. Go straight to the central park. They should be right in the middle of a great festival.”

Kino and Hermes entered the country and then sought the aforementioned central park.

Though they traveled down its thoroughfare, it was narrow and bumpy and only fields flew by left and right. Here and there, they could see puddles and furrows.

“Well, we know for certain these people couldn’t have built it.”

So Hermes grumbled.

Past the streets of log cabins was the park.

Wide and flat, it was composed of both forest and lawns.

Many people were present. There were probably over a thousand, with shops put up and music playing—a very lively atmosphere.

Kino walked Hermes in from the park entrance.

Tables and chairs were set up, in which people who were eating and talking sat.

Two kinds of people were visible.

The first appeared to be the country’s residents, wearing a uniform of checkered shirts. They comprised perhaps seven-tenths of the group.The second had clearly different customs, as they wore sleeveless shirts exposing their arms. Young and old, man and woman, all were darkly tanned, and as indicated by the sinews in their round arms, they wielded powerful bodies.“Hm, so there they are.”

So Hermes said, and Kino agreed.

It seemed that the residents greatly welcomed these road-workers at the festival. They brought food and drink and excitedly motioned for them to eat up.“Come to think of it, I’m hungry.”

Once Kino whispered this as meat flew left and right by her eyes,“But before that, we’re talking!”

Hermes was shocked.

When Kino pushed Hermes near, she called out to the checkered persons first.

“Hello. I just entered this country a while ago. May I know about this festival and those people?”

The middle-aged woman to whom she spoke exclaimed,

“Oh, my! More and more people by the hour!”

After that pleasant surprise,

“Why, then, I’ll introduce you to them. Come with me! ”

She guided Kino and Hermes to one of the tables where these people sat. This one was mainly composed of women and children.

A man in the prime of his life—of course, tanned and strong as the rest—said,“Oh! This is wonderful! — Traveler, if you haven’t had lunch yet, would you care to join us?”

Kino, of course, did not decline. Others introduced themselves to her, she set Hermes on its kickstand, and took a chair by the side.

The specific food presented was whole roasted pig, deer steak, boiled corn, bean soup, and much more.“ Come, come. Don’t hold back, eat up.”

Accepting their offer, Kino plunged herself into the food.

While she dined, Kino answered their questions, told them about how she and Hermes came from the east, how they ran into such a splendid road after hitting an extraordinarily bad one, how it saved them by getting them here ahead of schedule, and such.

“It was amazing! I’m extremely impressed!”

So assented Hermes, and meek smiles graced their countenances.

The residents spoke.

“Isn’t it?! It’s spectacular. Now more travelers and businessmen can gain access to here. Once we have more cultural exchange, perhaps we can develop. Once we prosper add increase our population…our dreams will be fulfilled! —All thanks to you. Thank you so much!” They applauded them.After wiping her mouth, Kino drank the tea served and began inquiring.

“Do you build roads as you migrate?”

“Indeed.”

So the aforementioned man replied, apparently the leader.

“We live by emigrating like a caravan does while we build roads. We currently have 297 among us.”

The man pointed off somewhere. The carriages and tents they were using were located outside the park.

The carriages carried wooden cranes, suggesting its use for public works. Along with a grand caravan, a heavy stone roller, bundles of rope for reaching high places, many shovels and axes, livestock for food, etc. were also visible.

“It’s strange for there to be so many people and materials in an emigration group.”

Hermes was impressed.

“Me too. It’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

So Kino said. The man continued.

“In order to make traveling easier for carriages and vehicles, we try to improve international roads. We build , we move, we go on. Much of life is moving, isn’t it. Our diet is primarily hunting-gathering, milk from our livestock, and once in a while, some meat.””I see. So while you built that road I just traveled on, you’ve been staying here.”

“Yes, since ten days ago. These people are very kind. They gave us permission to stay in this park for a prolonged amount of time and insisted we rest. And even this festival. It’s too much.”

At this man’s expression of gratitude, the resident froze instead and exclaimed,“Oh, no! This is nothing compared to what you’ve done!”

“So it isn’t as if you built a road just for recompense?” So Kino asked, and the man nodded.

“That’s our purpose in life. Though technically speaking, we just build roads ‘for the heck of it.’ Sometimes, countries with unstable military scold us. ‘ Now the enemy has an easier time getting to us—thanks! ’ Though when it comes that, we show them good defense spots and add fences, and then they let us off.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Forever.”

The reply so sudden, Kino repeated this.

“Forever, meaning?”

"Since I was born."

"… Then, do you have a country?"

"As for that, we no longer have one. —According to the records, five generations ago, certain people of a country no longer in existence began to split into different groups. Everyone abandoned their country all at once and we set out on a journey to build roads. Since then, we've raised our own children, sometimes picking up recruits from different countries or the wild, travelling forever and ever. The other groups must be making the best of themselves elsewhere, I'm sure."

"Then…why? Why do you do this?"

The man smiled at Kino's question, then replied.

"Of course, to be of use to everyone in the world!"

The next day.

Kino woke with the morning.

After light exercises, Kino practiced drawing the revolver she called Cannon, then dissembled it to clean. She took a shower and changed.

When she drew the curtain of the cheap hotel where she stayed aside, in the dim light, she saw the park ahead of the road.

"……"

Kino took out her snipe scope from her bag and observed the park.

A crosshair now in her vision, it revealed to her the sight of people packing their tents away.

"Well?"

Hermes suddenly asked from a corner of the room.

"Like he said, they're leaving today. Packing very fast. "

So Kino replied as she continued observing.

"There something on your mind, Kino?"

“Yesterday, I asked them, ‘why?’”

“You did.”

“And he said, ‘to help people.’”

“He did.”

“I don’t believe it. I can’t imagine they’d do this for centuries without some compensation.”

“Hmm. But what will you do?”

“They’re going west for another road—”

“I see. Even if you leave the day after tomorrow, you still have time to catch up to them.”

“When I do, I’m going to ask again. They may have had a reason they couldn’t answer here.”

“It’d be nice if that would work out.”

“Don’t know ‘til you try. —By the way, Hermes.”

“What?”

“If you’re going to wake up in the morning, then do so every morning. Then I wouldn’t have to get so tired trying to waking you up.”

“You understand something, Kino?”

“Understand what?”

“There’s never a single road for all the things in the world.”

“No, I don’t get it.”

And so Kino and Hermes remained in the country for another two days.

They sold what was sellable and bought what they should, and Hermes was replenished.

The people they met—

“So wonderful, isn’t it? They have the skills to build so many roads, but to think they’d do it for no compensation!”

“To find out that building roads is their purpose in life is awesome.”

“Don’t you see how their eyes just sparkle? It just shows how strong and at ease they are.” —each one lavished praise on the road builders.

The third afternoon, Kino and Hermes headed to the west gate for departure.

There was a freshly built, wonderful road stretched out into the hills of the forest.

As they began to leave,

“I believe you’ll meet them, so would you please thank them again for us?”

Kino accepted. One person who held a cloth bag said,

“If you can, would you bring this to them? It’s freshly baked bread. Perhaps reach them by tomorrow. Until then, you can use it for yourself, too.”

“Understood.”

Kino assented, tried to lash it down to her sleeping bag as best she could, and set off on the road with no one else in sight.

They proceeded some and stopped within visible distance of the country walls.

“If we just rush after them, it’s be a waste.”

Kino then steered off into the forest, found a spot that suited her, and set up camp.

Dinner that night was bread.

Next day.

Kino woke with the morning. She packed her tent and only drank tea.

Then she woke Hermes and departed, not even waiting for the sun to rise.

They reached the builders after just rounding one hill.

“This is…spectacular…”

“I’m with you.”

They beheld a road construction site.

Before her eyes, tents were lined on the freshly made road, women and children preparing breakfast. The livestock were penned nearby and the migration carriages were parked nearby.

A ways ahead, there were carriages specifically for the construction work cranes. Next to them, cut timber stacked neatly together.

And further ahead, there was no road. Just fallen trees, stumps as their remnants, and half-dried earth, with only forest ahead.

The men were already working. Their powerful bodies glistened with sweat as they hauled trees, dug up roots, pushed the roller to pack the earth, dug ditches, and directed overall construction with what appeared to be blueprints.

“So this is how they start…”

So Kino said, stopping Hermes and cutting the engine. The children who caught sigh of them happily bounded to Kino.

She removed the lighter baggage and approached the women.“Good morning. I brought bread from that country.”

After she was thanked, they invited her to breakfast. As Kino reciprocated her gratitude,

“Stingy.”

Hermes muttered at the sight.

After breakfast.

As the sun shone over the forest in the east, the man from the prior day sipped tea on a tree stump in a detached clearing.

“By the way—”

Kino approached him with Hermes.

The man upturned the corners of his mouth—

“ ‘The real reason why we build roads,’ yes?”

—and spoke abruptly. Then Kino—

“Yes. If you couldn’t reveal it there.”

—replied calmly.

“Very good! You’re very good. You’ve got guts and intelligence. Truly. Expected nothing less of a traveler. Different from the people in that country. I like you!” He pointed to Kino with the hand that held the mug. And once he drank down the rest in one gulp,

“I really do feel like responding to such a curious intellectual.”

“Ooh. Then you’ll tell us?”

So asked Hermes on its kickstand. Of course, replied he. The man motioned Kino to a nearby tree stump. She thanked him and sat down.

“I’ll tell you, but don’t tell the people in the country. Well, ‘cept even if you do, it won’t really reap you much benefit or be very useful.”Once he declared this,

“Our real goal. The reason why we continue to build roads is really our raison d’etre, but…it is—”

“Hm, hm.” “That is?”

To Kino and Hermes’s assents, the man replied in all earnest,

“To destroy all the people in the world.”

They began to hear the pounding of hammers.Their men, who finished breakfast, along with some women and children, began work on the road.

While these sounds went on, the man said to Kino,

“Amazing, right?”

He smiled. And then riddled, Do you get it?

“Destroy all the people…? I don’t quite see the connection.”

Kino replied honestly.

“Then I shall tell you—the grand plan of my forefathers.”

So the man announced grandiosely.

“Clappy clappy clappy.”

Hermes vocally applauded.

“Let’s start with your country. The country I’ve never seen, the homeland that no longer exists. —Apparently, it was in the depths of poverty. As winters passed, more corpses were born and eight of ten children died. When that’s all around, how can you have hope? Our ancestors parted from the world, cursing it. Why such a horrible life, they wondered.”

“And so, you came to hate the world?

Kino asked.

“Precisely. We don’t want such a shitty world. We’ve come to hate it and all of humankind. But just hating is so empty, isn’t it? Very sad. Our ancestors decided to do away with that life of hatred. He wholeheartedly decided to take revenge on the world. We settled on destroying it. ”

“And and?”

“Then our ancestors thought of ways to do. So what to do, what to do… They probably thought of taking up arms and using them to massacre. But they also figured out that wouldn’t work. It requires a ridiculous amount of effort. —What they need is power. If they don’t have it , then just use other people’s.”

“Hm, hm.” “So then?”

“And then he found the answer. The ingenious, most blasphemous spark of all. We hatched the frightful plan to exploit power from the very people we planned to destroy. So we began to build roads.”

“Mm?” “I still don’t see it.”

"This now is the heart of the matter. The first thing our ancestors thought of was how to destroy humankind, how to 'make this a place they can't live in.'"

"That's easy to understand." "I see."

"Now, what would a place uninhabitable for people be like?"

The man quizzed them.

"Waste lands."

So Hermes answered, and Kino gave a similar response.

"Well, true. It's a place without food or water. I've traveled through those sorts of places before."

He nodded.

"Right. As of now, we have water and vegetation. The vegetation supports the animals and the water nourishes the vegetation. It's where you can live. If so, then destroy these 'living spaces' in this world. So, make them crush themselves. By human power. Lots of human power."

“Ahh, now I get it.”

So said Hermes. Continuing.

“Let’s say on a small island are ten people. There are enough food and water for them. But, what if we had fifteen people?”

“Someone would starve.”

Kino replied.

“Right. The same with this world. If the carrying capacity exceeds, destruction will commence. So how to add more humans to the world?”

Kino answered,

“Make it prosper.”

“Precisely. As long as we enrich populous countries, people will beget people, and so will consumable foods. Of course, fields will expand as well, so they won’t fall so easily, but one day, they will hit the limit. Space for fields and water will start to run out.”

“Then that’s where roads come in, don’t they…”

“You got it. We build roads, we connect countries. And then what? They were very happy, right? Cultural exchange will explode and they will progress. Population will increase, countries will broaden, and prosper more than ever, won’t they?”

“So your aim is to expand these countries.”

“Yes. Leading these countries to one another is our goal. Wonderful roads will move people smoothly, shipping insufficient resources from affluent places. Then people will continue to prosper, and former nature will become engulfed by countries. Humans will grow more arrogant and multiply without bound, and in the end consume the entire world. Even if a clever fellow were to notice what was happening, it wouldn’t work. Humans are hedonistic. They can’t let go of what they find convenient. Then the have-nots envy the haves, and try to take it for their own, as well. That clever fellow can’t very well persuade all of those people, but neither is surrender an option. —This way, the world will slowly but surely bring about irreversible changes.”

“On that point, I assure you of humans’ ‘hedonism.’ This is coming from a Motorad, so this can’t be wrong.”

So said Hermes, and Kino cocked her head.

“Why is it reliable from a Motorad?”

“Y’know, Kino, about bystander’s vantage?”

Kino cocked her head again.

“…… Sorry, Hermes. I can’t think of the right word you mean.”

“It works! It means a third party knows the situation better than the party itself!”

As Kino and Hermes carried on this exchange, the man spoke.

“The most important thing to advance civilizations ‘til they fall—that is a road. The best and strongest invention created for the sole purpose of bringing humans to an end. We harness the people’s power, who will never notice, and one day we will crush them.”

“I see…I understand more of your grand plan, now.”

“But it’d require lotta patience. How long would it take?”

The man was sincere at Hermes's inquiry.

"Can't tell. How many millenia? Tens of millenia? Either way, long after you and I bite the dust."

"…"

Remaining quiet, Kino waited for his words.

"But, there's one great thing I never expected."

"Oh?"

"These humans' rapid technological advancement that come out from their hedonism, after all. Rides like you, Hermes, are now not unusual to see. Some countries I've seen have developed machines able to raise huge buildings. Such 'convenient' technology will assist human progress. Buses and trucks being faster than carriages, they ride lots of those. Large buildings provide more living space. I wonder if they can sustain the exploding population to the limit."

"Well, true. If everyone were to ride Motorads like Kino does, then fuel would definitely be the first to go."

"See? Exhaust filths the air and obscures the sun, and it's possible that it will prevent flowers and grass from even growing."

"And also, since carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas, the entire planet would heat up fast with huge amounts of it in the air. Atmosphere would change and the melted ice would raise water levels. Seaside people would be in a mess."

Hermes said this in a jolly manner,

"What?"

Kino cocked her head to one side and then the other thrice,

"She kind of doesn't know what's going on."

And the man again spoke.

"Well, doesn't matter. Basically means you're being a help to him."

“Yes, it’s a wonderful thing. —You saw the happy people there in that country, right? The faces of them carefree, welcoming us very warmly.”

“Yes.”

“They weren’t aware of anything. That we’re working so hard to steal their future away. That we’re trying to destroy them. Of course, the people today won’t die from that. On the contrary, they’ll live happy lives and enjoy the progress. Not knowing that their joy, their powers will destroy their own future…”

Observing this man’s ghastly smile,

“You’re enjoying this.”

Hermes stated so. Then man displayed his white teeth and grinned candidly.

“Oh, very! It’s absolute ecstasy! Just building the road gets me pumped up! Now that I’m out of that country of suckers, I’m so happy I could burst! What a wonderful life!”

"Kino's coming through. Clear the way!"

His clear voice cut through the construction site and stopped every hand.

From the present site, Kino—

"Thank you, everyone, for breakfast. We'll be taking off."

Drove Hermes on.

"Good luck everyone! It was a great road."

Hermes called out. Seen off by everyone's smiles, Kino entered many other narrow roads ahead.

And they hardly went far before stopping again.

"Geez!"

Kino cursed. In the dim woods, Hermes's back wheel raced in the dimly lit, damp earth.

“Kay kay~ Keep at it~”

So Hermes said as if this had nothing to do with itself.

“This is an awful road!”

Kino used all her might to jerk Hermes back and forth, fine-tuned the accelerator, and finally flew out of the dirt.

They coasted along again and,

“Wah!”

This time the front wheel slipped and threatened to topple the pair over. Kino furiously stuck out her legs and managed to prevent that. And then heaved a deep sigh.

Looking up at a sweaty Kino despite the little distance they covered, Hermes asked,

“Wanna wait for them to finish?”

As Kino glared at this awful road,

“I don’t have the time for that. —Even I’m human.”

That was her reply.

“Alrighty, then. Good luck to us.”

“Okay!”

Kino fired herself up and sped off again.

The forest became awash with Hermes’s voice and the blaring exhaust.

A Tale of Fighting People — Reasonable —

A lone motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was running inside a forest in the midst of spring.

On the level surface of this great forest was a single path among the budding greenery. It was a road of blackened earth, roughly one truck across.

The morning sun was dimly reflected on the silver tank of the motorrad. Two black boxes flanked its rear wheel, on top of which was tied a satchel as well as a sleeping bag.

Its rider was young. The mid-teen wore a brimmed hat with ear flaps that covered the ears and a pair of faded silver-framed goggles.

A wide belt fastened the rider’s black jacket on the waist, at the back of which was an automatic hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol), while on top of the right thigh was a holstered revolver.

Visible from the gaps of the mantle of leaves and branches on top of the road was the blue sky, snow white clouds floating high above it. The motorrad advanced in a relaxed pace while embraced by a refreshing breeze.

“Idyllic isn’t it, Kino?” the motorrad spoke.

“It sure is, Hermes,” replied the rider called Kino.

With the gear set on low and the accelerator barely touched, Kino drove through the easy-to-traverse road leisurely.

After riding for a while through the unchanging sceneries, “What an empty forest,” the motorrad called Hermes commented. “It would be a huge surprise if there is someone here. For us, and for the other side too.”

“…”

Kino’s eyes beneath the goggles narrowed for a moment.

“Whoa, a bolt out of the green,”[1] Hermes said, but Kino ignored the mistake and instead asked, “Is it people ? How many?”

Hermes answered, “They’re still far ahead. There are quite a number of them. Around ten, I believe.”

“Okay. If we encounter them, let’s try and have a chat, ” Kino replied, then accelerated.

The image of the trees flowing on both sides blurred as she sped up. After running like this for a while, Kino discerned human silhouettes ahead the road. She saw men waving at her.

“That’s rare,” Hermes mumbled.

Kino slowly dropped her speed and stopped in front of the men.

Indeed there were around ten of them. Some sat by the roadside, while some reclined against the forest trees.

Their ages varied. The youngest looked around his twenties while the oldest was perhaps around his fifties, but all of them had toned physiques. They wore outdoor jackets or vests, and their feet and elbows were dirty. They carried weapons—bolt-action rifles or revolvers—as if they were part of their bodies. Their luggage consisted of big knapsacks on their backs.

All of them had calm expressions, and none of them bore their persuaders threateningly. Among the group, a bearded man in his forties stepped forward and greeted Kino with a smile.

“Greetings. A traveler, I presume? Excuse us for the interruption, but there’s just something we would like to ask. It won’t take long so, do you mind?”

Kino left Hermes’ engine running as she replied, “Well no, if it’s something I could help you with. What is it?”

“Thank you. As you can see, we are traveling. We would like to know how far the nearest country is. We couldn’t tell after we’ve entered this forest.”

Kino answered the man’s question calmly and sincerely. “The direction where we came from should be near. I was just there last evening, you see. My top gear is in bad condition, so I was riding rather slowly.”

“Well I’m *sorry,*” Hermes mumbled once more. Kino continued.

“And it would probably take me three more days to reach the country I’m heading to, the one due west.”

“That’s good to hear. In that case, we’ll continue east. Thank you, you’re a life saver.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll be going ahead then.” Kino excused herself and passed through the men who waved their hands at her. When she looked back once, she saw the seated men stand up and start to walk away.

Kino rode at a considerably high speed for a moment and then halted all of a sudden. She veered off to the right side of the road and parked Hermes between the trees. Then she cut off the engine.

“Dear, dear…,” Kino alighted Hermes with a sigh and left Hermes reclined on a thick tree. She untied the rubber strap on top of the satchel and placed the rolled sleeping bag on top of the grass.

Kino opened the satchel while still placed on top of the rear carrier.

Inside were neither clothes nor traveling luggage, but a wireless radio. The large transceiver was fit inside as much as it can go.

Kino turned on the main switch and stretched the folded antenna. She let her goggles hang from her neck, and fixed the headphones on her ears. Then she took a microphone and connected the cord to the transceiver.

And finally, she pushed the microphone's talk button.

['Hat' to 'hood'. Do you read?]

* * *

Two days before.

During her second day in the country, Kino entertained some guests in the hotel she stayed in.

Her guests were eight men from their twenties to their fifties and a woman who barely appeared to be twenty. And in the arms of this woman was a tiny baby.

They asked Kino to be their bodyguard until they reach the next country.

For some undisclosed reason, they abandoned their country and has wandered about in a truck ever since.

The country they were currently in refused their pleas for migration, and having exceeded the period of stay they were given, they decided to head to the next country due west the next day.

However, it seems that bandits who targeted traders thrived in the huge forest along the route to the next country. They ambush vehicles traversing the single road , and threaten passengers to give up half of their cargo. Anyone who refused is mercilessly killed.

They were greatly disturbed upon hearing this story from the locals.

They were also armed with persuaders. However, they have practically no experience in fighting. Having half of their belongings taken away from them would land them in a life-and-death predicament. For that reason, they tried to look for bodyguards in the country. But as no one leaves a country with good public order, they were turned down.

And so, when by pure chance Kino entered the country, they tried to talk with her, clinging to a sliver of hope that she may be skilled due to the fact that she’s a traveler. They laid out their story to her even though they were only grasping at straws.

“How rude. Kino’s *strong* you know.”

With her motorrad, she could ride ahead of the truck and inform them if there were any suspicious people or traps.

As part of their strategy, they would lend her their precious transceiver, and hold on to her clothes that would no longer fit in her satchel.

And in exchange for keeping the bandits at bay,

“This is all we could give you.”

She was offered something of not much value, considering that she might have to risk her life.

Kino agonized over their offer for a while. Hermes only said, “Well, it’s for Kino to decide,”

She ended up accepting it.

When the visitors have left their room, Hermes asked why she took their offer.

Kino answered,

“Maybe because of that cute baby.”

Inside the forest—

Kino turned off the switch of the transceiver and grabbed the rifle attached in the cover of her bag.

Kino expertly assembled the two parts of the rifle, an automatic that can also be used for sniping. Kino called this ‘Flute’.

“So it’s them?”

“Maybe.”

Kino took out a cloth bag containing spare magazines, slapped a nine-round magazine into Flute and loaded the first round.

After closing the satchel and securing the sleeping bag,

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Roger.”

Kino left Hermes, and jogged into the forest by the roadside.

Kino proceeded, parting leaves and branches on the way, and stopped at a place roughly 300 meters away from the men. She detached the long cylinder at the right side of Flute and gently screwed it on the tip of the barrel .

“Now then…”

Kino bared her face towards the road from where she lay low in concealment. Looking once behind her to confirm that nobody was around, she aimed at the head of the road and took a peek in Flute’s scope.

Within the crosshairs of the circular field, she saw the backs of the men concealed in the forest that lined the road.

“So they’re bandits after all…”

Sure enough, all of the men had their knapsacks on the ground and had their rifles on the ready. There were even some carrying hand grenades among them. They appear to be preparing an ambush for the approaching truck.

Kino counted, moving Flute’s aim along. She confirmed that there were twelve of them, two men more than before.

The men concealed themselves behind the tree trunks. At the same time, the tiny silhouette of the truck’s roof began to appear at the end of the road. It was a brown, medium-sized truck with its loading platform covered by a green canopy. A log was tied across the bumper, placed there on Kino’s instructions.

The truck running at a slow pace made full use of the road’s width. Its body brushed with the leaves and branches overhead.

Kino looked at the concealed attackers who were not visible from the truck’s vantage point.

“Please don’t take this against me…”

As she muttered, Kino inhaled and aligned the scope’s crosshairs with the head of the man carrying a grenade.

Kino slightly shifted her aim and fired.

Within the cylinder, the sound of the shot was reduced , and only the bullet made its way towards the man.

True to its aim, the bullet hit the end of the man’s arm, causing skin and flesh to burst forth.

“Gah!”

The grenade fell from his hands and rolled on the forest floor. As the pin was not yet removed, it didn’t explode.

Then Kino fired at the leg of the first man to react and turn around. She carefully aimed at and hit an area on the thigh with no bones or thick blood vessels.

Seeing their comrades topple over, the rest of the men hid themselves into the forest. Kino fired at the leg of one man who was late to escape, making him pitch forward and collapse to the ground.

Not a soul was left on the side of the road, leaving Kino with no targets. The truck passed the road peacefully.

“Okay.”

Kino stood up and ran through the forest twice as fast as before, and returned to Hermes before the truck could catch up. She carried Flute on her shoulder and quickly straddled Hermes.

“Welcome back.”

“I wounded three men. That should make it difficult for them to chase us down.”

Kino booted down the kick-starter as she explained, bringing the engine to life.

“Kino, they’re here.”

The truck, which now rode faster along the road, passed by Kino. She looked at the east end and confirmed that there were no pursuers, then launched Hermes and ran after the truck.

She soon caught up with the truck. Two men with faces stiff from nervousness showed themselves from the platform, their rifles ready from the opening fortified with iron plates. They wore identical clothing—slacks and black shirts with standing collars.

One of them shouted to Kino. “Y-you did it! They’re not chasing us!”

“I know. Just escape for now,” Kino shouted back as she rode.

The truck continued its flight, scattering leaves on the forest road in the process.

While getting showered by these leaves, Kino and Hermes followed behind.

“Hmm, will we be able to get away like this?”

Kino immediately answered Hermes’ question. “No… If it were me, I would—”

Kino wasn’t able to finish. The truck braked so suddenly that the man on the platform had to quickly grab onto something. Kino was also forced to halt, bringing Hermes’ rear wheels to a sliding stop.

“I would set an obstacle beforehand.” Kino continued her interrupted words as she alighted from Hermes and nimbly put down the side stand.

She looked ahead of the road from the side of the truck . And just as she feared, there was a trunk of a tree across the road. A little bit ahead of the truck, the thick trunk of a collapsed tree completely obstructed their path.

“It will be fine. You can break and push it out of the way,” she cried out to the men in the platform, but before her instructions reached the driver’s seat, the truck advanced. It drove forward a little, but its prow soon turned to the right.

“Wha—”

Right in front of the speechless Kino, the truck disconnected from the road and entered the forest northward.

Kino rushed over and noticed that the truck followed a hardly visible, narrow road. It disappeared into the forest , breaking tree branches along the way. The men in the truck waved to Kino to quickly come over.

“You shouldn’t go there!” Kino shouted, but the truck, with its slight jolts, became farther and farther away.

“Aargh! It’s obviously a trap!”

As Kino straddled Hermes, “My sympathies. It must be a chore, handling inexperienced people. Now what will we do?”

She launched away as soon as she kicked Hermes’ side stand and started to run after the truck.

While running on the grassy road, Kino muttered a complaint to Hermes.

“Jeez… This is not going to be easy…”

* * *

Some time after the truck and the motorrad left, the twelve men arrived at the place blockaded with the log.

The three wounded men were bandaged, and borrowed the shoulders of their comrades in order to walk. Even though their faces were crumpled in pain, they seethed with desire for revenge.

“So that person was hired to be their bodyguard, huh … I let my guard down just because it was a young traveler.

The bearded man in his forties who spoke to Kino said as he looked at the fresh tire tracks on the forest floor. His face, especially his sharp gaze, was completely different from before.

“But they were caught in our trap,” another man from behind him said.

The bearded man slowly stood up.

“That’s right. From here on, there’s no need to rush. We’ll definitely kill them, that traveler included. —Now move that tree trunk. Don’t leave any traces on the road.”

The place that the truck finally arrived in was an ancient ruin.

After passing through the meandering forest path, and having no other road to take, they eventually arrived at this place—the remnant of what was once a fortress.

Suddenly, the flat forest floor gave way to stone pavement, around a hundred meters in all directions. There was a paved road, bordered on both sides with the remains of the walls of houses.

The wide road leads to the center, where a huge building was left standing. Around twenty meters at a side, it was the building at the very heart of the fortress, a sturdy structure that endured without collapsing. On top of its roof was a defensive wall that resembled the spaced-teeth structure of battlements.

“This place…is amazing…,” Kino muttered. Beneath her feet, Hermes tires were submerged in water.

The ruin was flooded. Its whole surface was immersed in ten-centimeter deep water.

There was a slight current in the water. It was clean like a clear stream; the transparent water allowed a view of the stones underneath. Also, by a trick of the light, the water’s surface reflected the walls and the sky.

“Isn’t it such a great place, Kino? The people who made this fortress created an almost perfectly level surface from stones.”

“And then the water from the river flowed in, creating this beautiful scenery… Really, if we weren’t in this kind of situation, I would be leaping in joy,” Kino bitterly noted as the truck stopped right in front of her. They proceeded through the wide road and stopped beside the central building. The leaves and dirt that stuck to the body and frame of the vehicle fell to water and were slowly carried away by the current.

The men in black clothes descended the truck one by one, protecting the woman carrying the child.

Kino got off Hermes, looked once behind her and stared at the perfectly straight road leading to the forest before approaching the men.

“Why didn’t you cut across that obstacle? This is a trap . We will be chased down here. We can no longer go back to that road,” Kino admonished.

“That’s…”

The men who were pressed for an answer had embarrassed looks on their faces.

“They did it upon my orders. Please don’t blame them. ”

The voice heard from the back belonged to a man in his mid-fifties, the oldest in the group. This tall and well-built man was the only one who wore a gray business suit among them. The white hair on his head stood out.

“If I’m not mistaken…you’re the doctor, right?” Kino said, and the man nodded.

Back when she was requested to escort this group, this man was constantly by the woman and the baby’s side. He had introduced himself as a doctor, and thus, couldn’t participate in the fighting.

As the one who appeared to be the group’s leader, everyone else stopped and paid attention when the doctor spoke.

“By the looks of it, we would have needed to hit it with the truck many times. That would be dangerous to the infant’s health. We cannot do that.”

Kino shook her head in reply to the doctor’s words. “ No. If you hold on to the baby tightly, that much should be—”

“We haven’t told you yet… I am sorry that things had to turn out this way.”

"… What are you talking about?"

"You see…this child was born with a weak heart, and only has more or less three years to live. This child's body cannot handle strong shocks."

No one showed surprised at the doctor's words. The men cast down their eyes, and the woman holding the soundly sleeping baby in her arms tightened her embrace.

"Oh my," Hermes let slip, while Kino heaved a sigh.

"… I would have preferred it if you told me that from the start."

"I'm sorry."

Upon hearing the doctor's words, Kino turned back.

And continued straight into the forest, trudging along the beautiful road that reflected the sky.

—

“It’s not nice being left out. Tell me everything later, Kino.”

Kino left the grumbling motorrad in a place a bit ways off from the truck,

“I know. Wait here for a bit.”

And headed back with Flute on her back.

“Hurry! Bring only weapons and food!”

On the doctor’s instructions, the eight men with luggage on their backs, the woman and the infant, entered the building at the center of the fortress.

—

“What’s with this place…?”

One of the men muttered right after they entered the building.

The building's interior was like a miniature version of the fortress. It was comprised of little rooms side by side with intersecting corridors, through which a pleasant breeze constantly drifted.

The rooms were bright from the sunlight that shone through the window frames. Inside several rooms, the stones from the remains of the houses were brought in and made into pedestals that served as desks, chairs, and beds.

In another room, they found firewood piled into a huge mound to prevent it from getting damp with the ankle-deep water on the floor. There were even remains of a recent campfire that was concealed by stones.

"…"

After noting the scenery around her, Kino first ordered two men to climb up the roof to keep watch. She believed it was too early for the bandits to come, but nevertheless instructed the men to quickly notify them with a shot if they see them. The men climbed up the stairs with rifles in hand.

“I didn’t think it was possible, but—” Kino spoke to the people left in the room, one which was roughly at the center of the building,

The doctor who carried a large bag on his back urged her to continue.

“Someone has been using this place.”

“What do you mean by…someone?” The doctor asked, and Kino quickly replied.

“I’m ninety percent sure that it’s the bandits. There are bedrooms, water supply, and the view’s perfect. It’s an excellent hideout.”

The men faltered at Kino’s words.

“Then that means, they are here right now to ambu—”

“They’re not here. If that’s the case, then someone should have been attacked already. The bandits probably set this place up so that they’re not in the same place at all times. This hideout is like that.”

“Then that only means we’re completely cornered in this place…,” the doctor said bitterly.

On the other hand, Kino spoke calmly, “They probably don’t want to be seen having a fire fight on the road. But you see, watching all directions and fighting on the defense isn’t a shabby plan either.”

“Is that so? Then—”

One man was about to say something, but Kino’s next words swept away his hopes.

“The problem is how long we could keep up a siege. We don’t have much food, and we can’t leave this place. We’re at a disadvantage no matter how you look at it. They, on the other hand, can lie in wait in the forest and wait until we exhaust our resources. If I had known it would come to this, I would have shot to death those three, but it’s too late now.”

“Then…”

“If we don’t come up with a way to quickly annihilate them, it will be our loss.” Kino answered instantly. And soon after, “Huh?”

Kino tilted her head, wrinkled her eyebrows, and stared at the flowing water.

“‘Annihilate’… That’s weird…,” she muttered.

Seeing her expression, one of the men asked uneasily. “W-what’s the matter?”

Kino lifted her face. “It’s strange… Now that I think about it, it doesn’t make any sense. Why haven’t I noticed it back then?”

“What are you talking about?” The doctor asked. Kino answered without hesitation.

“The way the bandits acted. After blocking the road and cornering us into making a detour, why didn’t they prepare another trap? They could have hidden grenades in the wheel ruts, and set them so that they would explode when the truck treads on a wire. Once the truck is incapacitated, that would take care of everything.”

“…”

“…”

Neither the doctor nor the five other men—no one—said anything.

Only Kino’s voice bounced off the stone walls and resounded in the room.

“They won’t do so because they don’t want to. There’s no other explanation. Those people—”

Kino stopped in the middle of her explanation.

Then she faced the six men and the woman, who looked nervous from the start.

“Is there anyone…injured? Including those two who went upstairs?”

“Huh…? Nobody…,” the doctor answered with much puzzlement.

“Then—”

Kino pointed at the bed in one corner of the room.

“Then…whose blood is that?”

Over there, the water was tinged with a different color. The darkish fluid drew a line at the otherwise clear stream.

When the men turned back in surprise, the line became muddled and vanished, but soon returned to its original state.

The line went out to the corridor, and disappeared upon getting mixed along with a different stream.

“W-what…?”

Kino looked askance at the men as she approached the source. So as not to disturb the water at her feet, she slowly and carefully stepped forward.

The line was coming from the next room. It flowed nonstop from the gap between the stone walls.

Kino asked the woman with the baby and two bodyguards to remain, and took the doctor and the rest of the men with her out of the room. They moved slowly to the front of the neighboring room.

It was a small room with heaps of stone piled up before its entrance.

Upon Kino’s request, the men quickly removed the stones. Once the stones were out of the way, they found another set of stones, disorderly stacked into a chest-high pile inside the room.

And after moving a couple of these stones, they finally discovered what lay beneath it.

“…”

The men and the doctor were speechless. Only Kino spoke.

“I see.”

Underneath the mass of stones were corpses.

They were squeezed in the small room, one corpse on top of another. There were roughly ten to fifteen bodies in all.

The corpses all belonged to men, necks cut and heads shot. Judging from their complexions, it must be about half a day since their deaths. They wore green and brown patterned clothing that were suited for the outdoors.

"W-what are these people…?" A young man asked, pale in the face.

Kino answered his question.

"Obviously, these are the *real* bandits."

When Kino returned to the room where they left the woman and child, she called out to the two who were on the lookout at the roof. There were no people approaching from the forest, and it was almost noon.

As Kino felt the gazes of every single person in the room save for the child, she spoke.

"Let's get back on topic. Like I said before, those people targeting you are not after your luggage. We just saw the proof. Those people aren't bandits. The bandits who operated around this area, and who were using this place as their hideout, were killed by those men last night.” No one interrupted. Kino continued. “Then, who are they?”

The men gulped at the sudden question. The woman trembled slightly, while the doctor only gazed wordlessly at Kino.

“…”

“You all knew, didn’t you? That that group was not after your belongings, but your *lives*. That what you truly fear are not bandits at all.”

“…”

“Who are they?”

No answer. Kino lightly shrugged her shoulders.

“Fine. If you don’t wish to answer, then I won’t force you. But since I no longer have any obligation to protect you from bandits, I will go back to where Hermes is, and do what I want.”

“Wha—! You plan to betray us?!”

Kino coldly replied to the man who shouted. “The ones who lied from the start were you. That’s a violation of our contract. If you don’t inform me of what you know , I can’t do anything for you. —I will tell those guys the truth, and escape on my own.”

“Damn you!”

The man in front of Kino reached out for the holster in his waist.

And just as the doctor yelled for him to stop, Kino kicked the man’s hand.

Kino’s boots caught the man’s hand without so much as a splatter, sending the revolver flying in mid-air before falling into the water and slipping into one corner of the room.

“Guh…”

“If you don’t pick that up quickly, it will get damp,” Kino immediately said as she backed her feet away, her right hand already touching the revolver she called ‘ Canon’. The doctor hastily split them up.

“Stop this. Fighting with Kino is pointless. I don’t want to say this, but Kino is much stronger than any one of us. And if by any chance we manage to outnumber her, what will we do next? Have you forgotten our goal?”

The enraged men dropped their shoulders. The man who got kicked picked up his persuader, whisked off the water, and returned it to its holster.

“Kino, there was no need for you to provoke us. We recognize that we are in the wrong,” the doctor entreated .

“Then will you tell me about that ‘goal’? Anyway, I don’t think those guys would forgive me that easily even if I wave a white flag.”

“I understand… I’ll tell you everything. Everyone, is that okay?”

The men silently cast their gazes to the floor.

Then the doctor looked at the baby held by the woman .

“That baby girl is the last surviving member of a royal family. I am that family’s physician. All of us here were that family’s attendants and coachmen.”

The woman silently and sorrowfully hung her head. Kino turned her gaze to the doctor.

“Go on.”

“About half a year ago in our country, the monarchy was overthrown by a revolution. All members of the royal family were captured and executed… And this child is the sole survivor.”

“That means, those people targeted this child in their hunt for remaining survivors—wait, no, it’s the opposite, isn’t it?”

“Exactly… Those men were formerly royal guards, and ardent supporters of the monarchy at that. You see, our country is in a state of chaos even now. The citizens are nowhere near as fanatic as those men, but in the midst of the ongoing instability, there are by no means few people who wished to restore the royalty.

Consequently, those men conspired to get hold of the last survivor of the royal family, and elevate her to the throne and revive the system.”

“I see… That’s why they wanted to capture her alive no matter what.”

“That’s right. And in order to stop that from happening, we left the country. We have no need for the monarchy. We only want this child to live her remaining days in freedom…”

“Are those men aware of this child’s condition?”

“Of course they don’t know. The only ones who knew are the ones present here. But even if they do know about it, I doubt it would make any difference.”

“How long have they been after you? Ever since you left the country?”

“No. We thought our escape was going as planned, but… I think the messenger we sent to the country got caught. We waited for a long time in the country where we met you, but he did not come back. We had to conclude that the worst has happened.”

Kino exhaled. “Good grief. I just got myself caught up in such a complicated matter.”

“Look here, Kino. There is no way for people like us, who know nothing about fighting, to ward off trained soldiers. On the other hand, there’s no way for you to go back to that road safely either. Hermes stands out too much.”

“I guessed as much.”

“I know that we have asked you such a selfish request, but let me say it again. Please stay with us. If this child safely arrives in the next country, we’ll give you that truck as a reward. It’s the most valuable thing that we have. If you sell it, you should be able to get a lot for it.”

“Doctor—!” the men reacted with raised voices to the doctor’s proposal. However, the doctor slowly raised his hand.

“The most important thing here is life. We decided that we will do everything to get, this child at least, to the next country. Just three years. Time will pass, and our mission will be over. Everything will be over.”

Seeing the men dropping their shoulders and in the verge of tears,

“Okay. Even without that reward, I have no choice but to do this if I want to survive.”

The doctor thanked her again and again until Kino asked him to stop and gave instructions,

“We need more weapons. Please hurry and look for some.”

“Can there be weapons in this ancient ruin?” the men asked.

“Sure. Those that belonged to the dead bandits. There are no weapons on the corpses. That stuff is heavy so I don’t think they were carried off. They must be hidden somewhere here.”

“And that’s the gist of things."

“Dear me. You’re stuck in quite a mess, Kino.”

Kino and Hermes talked inside an area in the ruins surrounded by tumbledown walls.

It was a little bit past noon. The men were busy in their search for weapons. The two men on the rooftop were substituted, and even then there were no reports or shots heard.

With Flute on her shoulder, Kino took out the wooden box containing spare bullets and liquid propellant from the box beside Hermes’ rear wheel.

“What if we just run away right now? If you sell the transceiver in your bag, maybe you’d get enough to buy a new set of clothes,” Hermes quickly commented, and Kino answered casually.

“If I had another path to take, I would have taken it.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. So?”

“So If I ever find one, I will.”

Kino answered as she carried the wooden box under her arms.

“I’ll say it just in case. —Goodbye, Kino.”

“Yeah. —Goodbye.”

“Just how many times have I told you that?”

“No idea. Well, later.”

Kino cocked her head with a smile, then trotted on the watery surface, creating ripples amidst the mirrored sky. Along with the splashing sound, she ran from one ruin to another and returned to the building.

—

“I’m afraid this is everything.”

Only old weapons were gathered in one room of the building.

Old rifles packed with gunpowder and bullets, and a number of hand persuaders.

Three of the rifles were revolver rifles, which have rotating cylinders for magazines. The liquid propellant for these was stored in about ten bottles of liquor.

There were fourteen bladed weapons of various sizes, but they weren’t sharp enough to cut down anyone.

And then there was a cannon placed on a wooden carriage, but it was so ancient that it is more fitting to be in a museum.

“All of the persuaders are so old; using those is out of the question. Even though there’s plenty of liquid propellant for those, I’d rather use my bolt-action. The swords and daggers will probably be useful in close combat,” one man made his report.

“The cannon is an antique. Because its structure consists of only one pipe, we can probably use it if we wash the inside thoroughly, but even though we have some gunpowder, we don’t have any cannon balls.”

Another man suggested that they use the swords as cannon fodder, but the man shook his head and continued.

“Those would barely fly. It would be no different from using crushed stones. Besides, this type would be done for in just one shot. We have to fix the carriage to prevent it from being blown off backwards from the recoil, so we won’t be able to change its direction very well. In the first place, we can’t fix it in this place.”

The man said while holding down the carriage. The wooden wheels moved very easily. And no matter how many times he pushed down the wooden fixture at the bottom of the cannon to the ground, it would only slip and wouldn’t catch on.

“I see,” Kino muttered, having assessed the situation at hand.

“It’s all over… Everyone’ll get killed…,” the youngest man, only in his early twenties mumbled.

His companions beside him grabbed his shoulders.

“It will be fine. Nothing’s decided yet, okay?”

“But we’re normal humans! We’re nothing like those soldiers who endured sadistic training… Can you win against people who don’t give a damn about killing humans? They slaughtered the bandits! What? Can you fight them?”

“No… but—”

The young man refused to listen to the continuation of his comrade’s words.

He suddenly dropped his rifle into the water,

“I’ve had enough!”

And dashed away with a scream. The other men tried to grab hold of him, but their hands grasped nothing but air.

The young man continued to yell, rushing to the south towards the main road.

“I’m giving up! I surrender!” He wailed out to the top of his voice, violently disturbing the water’s surface as he continued to race through it with all his might.

“What was that?”

The lookouts on the roof asked, but no one was able to answer.

“I surrender! Please spare me! I give up! I surrender!” the young man shouted out as he ran.

And when he was only ten meters away from the forest,

Bang.

He collapsed at the same time the piercing shot was heard.

The young man tumbled forward, sending forth a spray of water.

And never moved again.

“Damn it!”

The roar of the lookout on the rooftop was heard, followed by the sound of his rifle.

“Please don’t fire if you can’t see the enemy! It’s a waste of bullets!” Kino quickly looked up and yelled out.

“…I know. I’m sorry…”

Only the man’s lifeless voice returned.

The building was wrapped in silence, but only for an instant—

The next moment, the infant burst out into violent wails. The woman tried to hush her, but like an ignited flame, her crying won’t stop.

“…”

While shrill cries resounded in the building, Kino pulled out Canon from her right thigh.

A moment before.

"I surrender! Please spare me! I give up! I surrender!"

A person saw a man screaming and running out from the building that he was observing.

"Fire."

The bearded man inside the forest uttered a single word of command.

The man sitting on a branch of a thick tree, clutching a rifle with a scope, fired.

Right after, a shot returned from the building's rooftop . But the bullet flew in an entirely wrong direction.

"I can aim at them right now, should I fire?" The sniper's voice was heard.

"No, it's fine," the bearded man replied, looking at the truck parked in front of the building and the man crouched on its rooftop through his binoculars. “There’s no need to rush. Time is on our side.”

“Understood.”

The men concealed themselves in the forest once more.

“Captain. Here.”

The man who was shot in the leg by Kino approached, supported by makeshift crutches, and handed the bearded man a metallic cup full of tea.

“Thank you. How’s your leg?”

“It’s awfully painful. But I’ll make sure that traveler feel this pain.”

“Please do us the favor. —We’ll return to our country together with the princess. Everyone’s waiting for us.” The bearded man showed his subordinate a kind smile.

“Yes sir!”

Then he accepted the cup of tea from the man who nodded with determination.

While the bearded man was slowly sipping his tea,

The infant’s clear cries began to be heard from afar.

“It’s the princess. She’s safe!” Someone exclaimed. Smiles appeared on the men’s faces.

And in the next moment—

Bang.

A muffled shot subdued the cries.

“Wha? Someone fired!?”

“No!”

During this short interval, another heavy shot was heard.

Bang. Boom. Boom. Bang. Bang.

And eventually, the sound of a different persuader overlapped with the first one.

“There’s a shootout inside there!” The sniper yelled out.

“What?”

The bearded man threw away his cup and grabbed his binoculars.

Occasional flashes of light could be seen from within the building, followed by firing noises. The two men on the rooftop climbed down in a panic.

“They are fighting among themselves!?” The bearded man continued.

“Those bastards! Right in front of the princess!”

“Those morons!”

“It must be that traveler!”

The men concealed in the forest raised agitated cries.

“Their lookout climbed down! Should we break in?” the sniper asked from above.

Bang. Ping. Bang.

While listening to the incessant noise of persuader fire, "It's too dangerous right now. Let's wait for a while."

The bearded man answered, gnawing at his lip as if he just tasted a lemon.

—

Meanwhile, someone was hearing the same shots at a much closer distance than the men.

"Oh, she's really going at it! Pounding away with both Canon and Woodsman, eh?" Hermes said in glee.

—

The shooting spree settled down after about thirty seconds.

"…"

The bearded man saw that the movements have ceased in the building through the circular view of his binoculars. Behind him, the sniper and his seven uninjured comrades have their rifles at the ready, prepared to break in at any moment.

“Maybe that traveler killed all the coachmen…?”

“I don’t know. But it’s… possible,” the bearded man answered.

And the moment he put down his binoculars,

“C-captain, look at the entrance!”

The sniper raised an alarmed voice, prompting the bearded man to lift his binoculars once more.

And roughly fifty meters ahead, on the southern entrance of the building,

“What!?”

Someone was tossing out a corpse. It was, without a doubt, the traveler aboard a motorrad, the one they met just that morning.

The traveler shoved away the corpse of a man much bigger than himself from the side of the entrance.

It sent forth a spray of water. The body lay motionlessly with its face down, just like the corpse that tumbled roughly ten meters away from the forest. And like the first corpse, it wore the same black uniform.

“Again,” the sniper reported.

For a second time, the traveler carried out a corpse and threw it beside the first once. There was another splash.

“The next time he comes out, should I shoot his arm?” the sniper asked.

The bearded man reserved his reply while he glared through his binoculars.

“…?!”

And began to hear the cries of the baby once more.

“Don’t! The princess is safe!” he ordered immediately.

“Understood. I’ll wait for your command.”

With the baby’s cries as the background, the traveler appeared beside the entrance for a third time, and hurled out another corpse. Its face was stained deep red that it was no longer recognizable.

“What is he doing…?”

The question was answered by another soldier.

“Maybe he broke up from the others to escape?”

“One of those guys? —Ah no! It must be that traveler!”

“Perhaps he wasn’t told about the situation? That traveler doesn’t care what happens to the princess. Maybe he’s planning to use her as a bargaining chip against us?”

“No way… You mean he’s planning to take the princess hostage and escape on his motorrad by himself? ”

Upon hearing the conversation, the bearded man spoke.

“Quite a formidable fellow, I see. He’s deliberately showing us the corpses. If he proposes negotiation, we’ll go along with it.”

“B-but captain! That’s—”

“Have you forgotten our goal?”

“… No sir! It is to safely escort the princess back home, sir!”

“Indeed. For that, we should be willing to cooperate even with that cunning scum of a traveler. If he eliminated the coachmen who got in our way, we shall reward him.”

“Captain…”

“With a full metal jacketed lead bullet, that is. We have a superior sniper among us. Just one shot from behind, once he’s on the road. A second shot is unnecessary.”

Upon hearing these words, the soldier finally smiled.

“It’s the sixth one,” the sniper interjected. Now there were six corpses lying prostrate in front of the building.

“There’s only two more men. And the princess with that woman.”

“So, have you really slaughtered everyone, traveler?”

While the bearded man and his subordinates watched with bated breaths, the seventh body was thrown out. It was a man wearing a gray business suit.

“Hm?”

Right after casting the body away, the traveler pulled out the revolver from his right thigh and poked only his hand out from the entrance.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Three more bullets connected with the back of the head of the corpse.

They were large caliber bullets fired at point blank range. The head was blown off completely, and the scattering pieces of brain were evident even from fifty meters away. Seeing their fellow countryman being cruelly treated by the traveler, the men muttered,

“Dealing a finishing blow, huh…”

“Unbelievable…”

“That’s sick…”

“He didn’t have to go that far…”

“Straighten up! It’s not yet over!”

The bearded man attempted to bolster the dwindling spirit of his men with these words. The baby’s cries continued endlessly in the midst of it all.

”There’s one last person.”

Just as the sniper said, the traveler hurled out the last, black-uniformed man outside. The eight corpses rolled about, revealing the darkly-stained water flowing beneath.

“He’s really done it… Splendid work.” The bearded man took a deep breath and uttered these words of praise, then gave the sniper strict orders. “Don’t let a single bullet loose unless someone gets shot, or until you receive my orders.”

"What's next now, oh superb traveler?" He muttered and waited patiently.

The baby's wails stopped twenty seconds later, and the occasional chirping of birds was the only sound heard for the quiet hundred seconds that followed.

"I have something to say! CAN-YOU-HEAR-ME?!"

Until the traveler's voice was heard.

—

"Yes, we can hear you! How about from there?"

The man's voice returned to the southern entrance of the building where Kino was hiding.

She was crouched, washing her bloodied hands in the flowing water by her feet.

“Oh. —I wonder if this would work out?” she mumbled as she stood up. There was nobody nearby.

Kino inhaled deeply. “I can hear you! Will you listen to what I want to say?” She shouted as loudly as she could, with her hands cupped around her mouth. She hid slightly behind the entrance to avoid getting shot.

“Let’s hear it!”

Upon hearing the man’s reply, Kino began.

She said that the men who asked for her services lied to her, so she killed them all.

That she tortured the woman and found out from her that the child was a princess.

That she had no interest in their dispute, and her top priority is her and her motorrad’s welfare.

That she was sorry for attacking them, and that she would like to exchange the child for her safety. She also had no need for the truck.

That she would like them to come over to check the corpses and to hand over the baby.

Several times during the exchange, a reply would come back to tell her that she can't be heard properly, and each time, Kino had to make her voice louder and would complain afterwards. "Haaah… My throat's getting tired."

Upon catching Kino's words, the bearded man made his decision.

"We'll go along with your proposal."

He ordered the three injured men to remain in the forest together with the sniper, and made the remaining seven accompany him.

"Preparations complete."

Hearing his subordinate's report, he shouted back at Kino.

"Eight of us will come! If you let out even one shot, the deal's off!"

"I understand! But at least come up to a place where we can talk normally! **Cough*!*"

"Okay! Don't let your guards down," the bearded man quickly reminded his men upon hearing Kino's reply.

The bearded man took the lead himself and stepped out of the forest towards the ruins. His boots made contact with the water.

—

"So they came…"

Kino saw the men proceeding through the road.

Kino clutched an aluminum flask in her hands. She swallowed water from it, gargled and spat out at her feet.

The eight corpses still rolled about when she took a glimpse outside. They were divided equally to the left and right, with four bodies on each side, leaving a width of around three meters in the center.

The blood from the corpses continued to stain the flowing water. The blue sky and the white clouds reflected in the surface were of a strange hue.

The men stood at the end of the road.

With their rifles poised at their hips, they scattered on both sides of the road. While being vigilant for an ambush, they proceeded while keeping a certain degree of distance from each other. One would notice that they were considering using the abandoned buildings for shelter in case they were attacked.

“This is literally a ‘one-shot’ match,” Kino said while looking at them.

“W-will it really be all right?” A man’s worried voice returned from within the building.

“Well, we won’t know unless we try.”

“Hey…”

“But you know, I learned all of this by the book in a school. It should work. Please do everything according to plan. The length of the fuse is crucial,” Kino said.

Time crept at a slow pace while the men advanced on the road for over half a minute.

And when they were roughly twenty meters from the building, the bearded man at the front right raised his left hand into a fist.

In a moment, his men stopped and guarded different directions.

“Traveler!” the bearded man spoke up.

“I suppose this is near enough? Both of our throats are already painful, so let’s get over this with!”

“I agree.”

He heard Kino’s voice from above.

The bearded man raised his face. Kino stood on top of the roof.

Kino exposed her entire body without hesitation, and stood as far as she could with one leg at the edge of the roof.

“Princess…”

With the swaddled baby in her arms.

—

"That bastard…"

At the same time, the sniper found Kino and overlapped the crosshairs with her throat. But he soon realized that there's a chance that the baby will get dropped if he shoots.

"Damn!"

He could only let out a curse.

—

"Greetings, traveler!"

"Hello. You're the captain, I presume?"

Kino and the bearded man first exchanged these words. And then,

"That's around twenty meters, eh? I'd be happier if we could talk to each other normally like this morning."

The bearded man pointed to the baby with his left hand that was free from the rifle.

"Traveler, could the little one you're holding up there be our country's precious princess?"

"That's right. I heard everything from those corpses down there. You want this child to revive the royalty."

"It's just as you say."

"But honestly, all of that's none of my business. I don't care what happens from here on. What's important to me is to be able to continue traveling with my motorrad Hermes just as before."

"I guessed as much."

Initially, the bearded man's subordinates were vigilant of their surroundings, but eventually, their attention became focused towards Kino. They all strained their ears to listen to the conversation.

"And so, I got rid of those men who lied to me and got me involved in this kind of situation."

"That's really wonderful. I thank you for making our work easier. Sure you've attacked three of my men, but their lives weren't really in any danger. Just like this beautiful place, why don't we just let our differences be carried away by the current? You know, forgive and forget?"

—

"Oh, they came—"

Hermes, who was listening to the conversation from a place not so far away, mumbled to himself.

—

“That’s great. Then I have a suggestion.”

“Sure, I’m all ears.”

“Okay. With this baby in my arms, I will get my stuff ready, and ride Hermes until that road. Meanwhile, you guys will follow me using their truck. By the way, you can take along the woman taking care of this child, since she’s passed out inside.”

“I see. —Then?”

“Once we all reach the road, I’ll leave this child a bit ways off from you. Then, I’ll ride away at full speed. If I successfully escape without you chasing me, then that’s the end of all this. You can take the baby with you and go home to your country on that truck. That’s all.”

“Wonderful. We have no reason to reject that idea, but suppose we refuse and interfere with you on the way, what will you do?”

“I don’t want to think about it too much.”

Kino took out a tiny bottle from her jacket pocket. It was full of a greenish liquid, and there was a small fuse stuck between the cork and the bottle’s mouth. She gently placed this on top of the swaddled baby’s belly.

“If I fall, the impact will send this child, me and Hermes, exploding.”

Damn you!

After calming down his men’s outburst, “I don’t want to imagine that. We will do our best to avoid that terrifying situation.”

“It’s a deal then.”

“Deal. We’ll watch you leave without a word.”

“And let your sniper do the job?” Kino quickly retorted.

“…”

The bearded man fell silent.

“If it were me, that’s exactly what I’d do!”

Kino cried out, then nimbly climbed off the edge of the roof and turned to the stairwell that led inside the building with a shout.

“Fire!”

There was an explosion.

A thunderous roar incomparable to persuader fire was heard from within the building.

The bearded man with his face raised up to Kino, as well as the men dispersed left and right of the road had their attentions stolen by the sound of the blast.

That is, towards the entrance of the dark building.

“Wha—!”

A cannon came rushing towards the bearded man and his subordinates.

It came charging with its carriage on the beautiful, straight paved road facing south, splashing water along the way. Its two wheels kicked up waves on the water like a ship.

And only three seconds after it appeared from the building,

“!?”

The bearded man saw the antiquated cannon pass through his side.

He noticed that the cannon on the carriage was facing the wrong side. He immediately realized that the cannon was fired from the building, and bolted away due to recoil.

“Hahah!”

The bearded man laughed inadvertently at the idea, then smiled upon seeing that none of his men were hit by the cannon, which came charging straight on the road.

At the same time, the bearded man's excellent eyesight caught the numerous wooden boxes attached at the fixture behind the carriage.

And he recognized the fuses extending from them. They were lit. And short.

"Huh?"

And the next instant, the boxes exploded.

—

The moment Kino confirmed that the cannon has 'fired', she flopped onto the back of the fences with the baby in her arms. Cuddling the infant near her belly, she headed north.

The bottle on the infant's stomach fell, and the greenish liquid—which was nothing but water—scattered on the roof.

The boxes on the carriage exploded roughly at the center of the men.

The liquid explosive produced flames and shockwave, creating hundreds of tiny ripples on the surface of the water.

The flames engulfed four men including the bearded man who was up front. Their skin and clothes caught fire , turning them into human torches.

Meanwhile, the shockwave and the fragments of the carriage assailed the remaining four. Their bodies were blown off and sent crashing towards the walls of a house, head first. Soon, pulpy matter that likely belonged to their brains scattered on the walls.

A second explosion resounded apart from the first, running across the blue sky.

Having survived the explosion without breaking, the sturdy cannon barrel danced in the air and fell on one wall of a house, shattering it into pieces.

“W-W-WATCH IT!”

Consequently inviting a scream from Hermes, who stood merely three meters away.

* * *

“Ah…”

The sniper who witnessed everything from his scope was shook by the blast that was delayed by a beat, and almost fell from the branch.

When he has regained his position, what he saw were four of his companions now indistinguishable from the clots of blood splattered on the wall, and the other four raising screams, dancing madly as they blazed.

"…"

He fired.

First, at the commander he respected. Reload.

Then at a comrade, a batch mate of his in the military academy. Reload.

Next, at a rather odious soldier two years his junior. Reload.

And lastly, at the young soldier whom he treated like a younger brother. Reload.

Four shots were heard in less than four seconds, and the screams ceased as their owners were finally laid to rest. Then he immediately jumped down from the branch .

"Retreat at once!"

The moment he called out to the three shocked men, he noticed that one of them had a thick slab of wood pierced into his face.

"…"

He abandoned the corpse and slung the rifle on his shoulder.

“Stand up! Run!”

He slapped the back of the man who was injured in his hands and lent his shoulder to the one who was shot in the leg, and escaped.

The three men ran, trampling on the grass and the traces of the truck.

Soon, the man with the wounded leg fell over and blood seeped out from his bandaged wound.

“Hang in there! It’s going to be all right! They can’t chase us immediately! Once we get out to the road and run to the horses, it will be fine! Okay?!”

“Yeah…”

The man rose up once more, and together, they proceeded on the road.

The man with the injured hand, who was running in front of them, looked back, and also gave him words of encouragement, “Just keep at it! If you fall, I’ll carry you! ”

A smile drifted amidst the man’s anguished face, which was now drenched in cold sweat. “Hah! To think I ’d ever see a day when your voice will sound like that of an angel!”

“Moron! Since when did I become an ange—”

And right in front of the sniper and the man whose shoulders were linked with his, the man with the injured hand was stabbed.

It was a man clutching a dagger below his waist, appearing from the side of the road.

He wore blood-drenched clothing, that of the bandits who should have been killed the previous night. His clothes were filthy and his head was covered with leaves and branches for camouflage. His face was dark from blood stains.

The bandit leapt out from the right side and stabbed the man deeply in the gut, collapsing along with him.

At the same time, another bandit rushed out from the thicket,

“AAAARGH!”

Raising his axe along with a battle cry, and bore it down upon the men.

While being bathed with the blood that spurted out from the head of the man beside him, the sniper swung his rifle to the front and aimed at the face of the bandit.

“Guh!”

But the moment he pulled the trigger, his body turned to the sky. The bullet drilled a hole through the branches.

A third bandit clung to his neck from behind,

“DIEEE!”

And fed force to his arms as he screamed. But he lacked the strength to break the sniper's neck in an instant and the man's left fist connected with his muzzle.

"Gah!"

"Yaaah!

The moment the hold on his neck was loosened, the sniper executed a shoulder throw with unerring technique.

"Gyah!"

The bandit hit the ground with his back and uttered a pained cry.

"…Haah."

While he gasped for air, the sniper lifted his face and saw the blade of a blood-stained axe flying straight towards him.

The blow killed him in an instant, but the three coachmen struck down on his dead body as they screamed, again and again until everything from his neck up became a shapeless mush.

* * *

The three blood-spattered men returned to the fortress filled with corpses. Along the way, they threw up the contents of their stomach many times over.

As soon as they appeared, the men who wore nothing but their trunks rushed over to them, delighted that they were safe. Once they reported that they have eliminated the remaining guards,

“Well done…”

The equally pitiable-looking doctor praised the three men while tears flowed down his cheeks.

The three discarded their blood-stained clothes and waded on the cool water with only their underwear on. The blood that clung to their faces—the blood of the bandits and of the royal guards— dissolved into the water.

After the three men finished their bath, they asked about the baby.

“She’s fine. Her eardrums are not damaged because we gave her earplugs. Everyone else is also safe. I took care of the corpses together with Kino. Yes… Everything went according to Kino’s strategy. But you see, the one who did their best here is you. You have volunteered, and accomplished what I could not. You have won this fight! I arranged for drinks. Let’s give a toast to this victory, and to the future of our princess!”

Half of the afternoon has passed, and the blue of the sky has deepened.

On top of the road that reflected this sky, ten humans, one motorrad, and one truck stood.

They were in front of the building in the center of the ruins.

The corpses of the bandits that were thrown out in their stead were already moved away, and the clothes used on them were washed and lined side by side on top of the truck's canopy to dry.

On Kino's instructions, the bodies of the twelve guards and their fellow coachman were transported into the forest and covered with leaves.

The belongings of the guards that can still be used such as rifles, grenades, ammunition, and portable rations were gathered inside the truck.

The seven men all wore their underwear and were naked from the waist up. Towels hung from their waists or shoulders.

In the middle of this crowd was Hermes, who stood by his center stand.

“I’ve never dreamt of this sort of treatment!”

A board was placed on top of his rear carrier, turning it into a makeshift table.

The woman who carried the baby on her back poured crimson liquor from a freshly opened bottle into eight mugs placed on the table.

One bottle was barely enough for eight portions, but everyone took their mugs with pleasure. Only one was left on the table, an offering to their comrade who was already in heaven.

Within the circle of people, only Kino carried a cup that contained tea that she poured herself.

“Everyone— great job, great fight,” the doctor began. “ It was painful. It was terrifying. We lost an irreplaceable comrade, and we had to part ways with twelve more, who we used to exchange smiles with during work. Even so, we have fought for this child’s happiness! We have brought this bottle—the last taste of our home—for the time when we reach a safe land, but I believe that there’s no better time to savour it than today! —Any objections? Well it’s already open, though.”

“No objections! Don’t keep us waiting!” Voices and laughter leapt into the air.

The doctor raised his mug, and the men as well as Kino followed suit.

“For the stability of our homeland, for the future of this child, and for the meaning of our lives and the death of our comrades. —Cheers!”

A chorus of toasts was heard, and the eager men lifted the mugs to their mouths and emptied them in one gulp. Seeing this scene before him, the doctor smiled and took a sip from his own mug.

“—Don’t drink!”

He quickly cried out.

But it was too late.

“Oh?”

As a surprised voice leaked from Hermes,

“Ugh!”

“Gah!”

“Gack!”

“Ack!”

“Guh!”

“Hack!”

The six men other than the doctor spat out blood almost at the same time. The blood spurted out like tiny fountains. The men slowly collapsed and made splashes on the surface while blood dribbled out from their mouths.

The minute convulsions that shook the collapsed bodies soon disappeared. The blood flowing from their mouths was different from that of the bandits; a bright red dyed the water surface.

“Oh, dear,” Hermes muttered.

“Why…”

His cup fell into the water, and the pale-faced doctor collapsed. He desperately tried to walk a few steps towards the woman nearby, but his knees soon sank.

“Gah…”

And then, he was flat on the ground. With half of his face peeking from the water, and with dilute blood spouting from his lips, the doctor finally stopped moving .

After slowly sipping on her tea, Kino exhaled deeply.

About two meters away to Kino’s left, there remained only one person standing, right in front of the collapsed doctor. And this person was shouldering another.

The young woman who looked around twenty slowly turned her head and looked at Kino.

“All as planned!”

Kino first heard the woman’s voice, and then saw her smile.

—

"Okaaay, why?"

The one who asked the question was not Kino but Hermes, whose frame was stained with blood in several places. Kino remained standing, sipping her own tea while crimson blood flowed beneath her feet.

"Curious, motorrad? You really want to know why?"

The woman's speech was animated. She was smiling from ear to ear, her manner like that of a woman about to tell a secret to her lover.

"I wanna know! Tell us!"

Hermes replied with a tone just as joyful.

"Then I'll tell you! But before that, I would like to tell you something in advance, Kino. Is that okay?" The woman said, the baby still sleeping soundly on her back.

"Sure."

"Kino…"

The woman turned her gaze to Kino, and placed her hands politely in front of her body.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"…"

With the cup still in her lips, Kino only responded with a stir in her eyelids.

"It was thanks to you that we were able to fight off the royal guards. Thank you very much. And in behalf of this child, I thank you again. As her mother."

"… You're welcome." This time, Kino parted with the cup and answered.

"Now I'll tell you."

The woman transferred her gaze from Kino to Hermes. The woman's gentle voice reached Kino's ears.

"I am this child's real mother. I am the one who bore her. And her father was, no doubt, the king killed during the revolt."

“That’s a surprise.”

“Isn’t it? Well, I’m the one who’s most surprised. I was just a mere laundry woman. I was practically the assistant of an assistant maid! That was two years ago.”

“Okay, and then?!”

“One day, the king came across me by chance, and ridiculous as it may sound, fell in love with me! He said I was lovely! That made me really happy! Of course the king had many consorts to choose from, and he had many children, but he fell in love at first sight to a nobody like me!”

“And after that, you got pregnant with that child.”

“Yes! But it was soon discovered. The royal palace was truly a serpent’s nest. When my child was chosen to become heir, his wives used the royal guards to threaten me. They told me that nothing good will come out of giving birth to this child, and it was not yet too late for me to give her up…”

“My, my.”

"But I wanted to give birth to her no matter what. And so upon consulting with a kind doctor I met in the royal palace, he wrote a medical certificate saying that I aborted the child, and I was able to leave."

"Is that by any chance, that person there?" Hermes asked.

"That very man," the woman answered immediately without even a glance back.

"And so, I went home to my village, which was located in the outskirts of the country. I told my mother a lie. That my lover who promised to marry me died in an accident. Oh dear mother, I apologize for lying to you! But it was truly the best course of action. My mother joyfully accepted her grandchild, and I was able to deliver her safely. That was a little over half a year ago."

The woman spun her head around and looked at the sleeping baby on her back. She narrowed her eyes and stroked the infant's cheek with her left hand's finger.

"What happened after?" Hermes asked. Still holding the now empty cup, Kino listened to the continuation of the story.

“After that, the massacre disguised as a ‘revolution’ began. The kind king, his despicable wives, and even their children, were all killed. The vehicle bearing their guillotined heads reached even my village. Awful isn’t it ? Some time after that, the doctor arrived together with his co-workers, the coachmen of the royal family.”

“These men?”

“Those men, indeed.”

The woman answered with her gaze on Hermes, around which the half-naked men lay dead. Their bleeding has stopped, and the water has returned to the clear stream that it was, reflecting the sky in parts that the corpses did not cover.

“The doctor told me, ‘They have set their sights on your daughter. Your life is also in danger.’ Apparently, the remaining royal guards got wind of rumours about me, and are willing to go as far as to kill me. They are—”

“The ones who came to take the ‘princess’.”

“Yes! Isn’t it terrible? Because this child was the last remaining royal blood, they will take her away from me and will make her take the throne!”

“So you escaped.”

“Of course. The truth is I didn’t want to. But I ended up abandoning my country, leaving my village without even telling my mother the truth. We called ourselves ‘travelers’, but we were nothing but wanderers! I absolutely hated that kind of life! —Oh, excuse my rudeness, Kino. But I really hated it up to the very end. I’m sorry.”

Upon receiving the woman’s glance, Kino only waved her hands as if to say that she didn’t mind.

“As I didn’t have any choice, I escaped together with these men. We escaped from one country to another, but every time we thought everything was already safe, we would receive information that the pursuers are after us. We would leave countries in haste over and over again. I hated it.”

“And that’s all over now.”

"Oh yes! It's all over! I can leave that life behind! My life would no longer be in danger from those guards, and I no longer have to live the life of a fugitive!"

"Okay, then what will you do after this?"

"Thanks for being concerned, motorrad. You're really very kind."

"That's not really the case, but anyway, what will you do?"

The woman quickly raised her left index finger up, then winked with her right eye.

"I will practice!"

"Huh? Practice what?"

"How to drive a truck! I was praised for being good at it before!"

"Well, it's not really a good idea to live here."

"Obviously. I'm not that smart, but I'm not an idiot either. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to poison everybody!"

“Okay. —Well, sorry for repeating the question, but again, what will you do from here on?”

“Why of course, I’m going to return to my country.”

“What?”

“…”

Upon hearing the woman’s words, Hermes squeaked out a question, while Kino quietly inclined her head.

“What did you just say, miss?”

“I said I’m going to return to my country.”

“Why?”

“Why you say, but isn’t the country still yearning for a king, and is currently in the height of chaos?”

“But if you go back under such circumstances—”

The woman interrupted Hermes.

“Yes! My daughter shall become queen!”

—

Kino slowly approached Hermes, and placed her empty cup on top of the makeshift table.

She then lifted the last mug of liquor and poured its contents into the stream. The red soon melted away in the water and vanished.

Kino spoke. “Is that what you’re really after all along?”

“Of course. It entered my mind as soon as I heard the news from the doctor. This child shall become queen, and me, as her mother, will live my life in elegance and bliss. However, I wouldn’t be able to do what I want if I simply handed over my child to those guards. They only want my child, and couldn’t care less what happens to me. So I decided to have these people protect me until those guards give up, and then I’ll return to my country. Thanks to you, Kino, my plans came to fruition this early. I can’t help but rejoice!”

“So, that ‘three years left’ that the doctor said was…”

“A lie, obviously! It’s a story the doctor came up with to spur on the coachmen. He convinced them by telling them this: ‘Three years may be long, but once it’s over, this escape will come to an end and we can go home to our country.’ You see, the doctor and the coachmen have their own families too. But I didn’t think he would use that as an excuse for falling into that trap. The one who didn’t listen to you out of confusion was the doctor. But like they say, all’s well that ends well!”

“I see. So the saying ‘truth has more danger than fiction’[2] is true after all huh, Kino?” Hermes remarked happily, but Kino remained silent.

“As for me, I’ll find some country to settle in, and since these guys are out of my way, I can raise this child up well and return to the country and make a grand announcement! Great plan, don’t you think?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But if these guys weren’t around, I don’t have to wait long! That’s why I killed them. I helped myself with some of the medicine the doctor brought with him. I have said this many times already but, everything went according to plan because of you, Kino. Thank you very much!” The woman expressed her gratitude once more and continued,

“Ah, where are my manners? We haven’t talked about your reward yet! I want to repay you for the job well done! Well, I have to use this truck to get home, so maybe you can just pick something else you want? I will be in need of funds from here on so I can’t just give you anything and everything, but I’ll give you as much as I can. If only I could give you my happiness in return! Oh right, it’s only a little, but I think the coachmen have a few gems with them! When we left the country, they took all of the valuable things from their houses! We can use them since they brought them for our sake anyway, don’t you think?”

Hermes dropped his tone a little and asked the ecstatic woman, “Is it really okay to say that? What if Kino decides to kill you and carry off everything?”

“Oh my, Kino won’t do such a thing!” the woman proclaimed with a smile.

“Why?”

“Because there’s no way a person like that would fight for a baby! That just doesn’t make any sense. I’m a woman so I know. Kino can be very brutal in a battle, but the truth is she’s actually a very kind person!”

“That’s what she says. But what will you do, Kino?” Hermes was finally able to squeeze a reply from Kino after such a long time.

“Well I…don’t want to…kill any more people…today …”

Kino answered one phrase at a time.

“I knew you were kind, Kino!”

“No.”

Kino immediately denied the woman’s words. At the same time—

At the end of Kino’s gaze, that is, right behind the woman, a man stood up.

While water dripped from the taut muscles of his naked torso, the man stood with a look of someone possessed by a demon.

The man's thick arms seized the woman's small head.

"Huh?"

This was the only word the woman was able to say. The sound of cracking bones followed.

Her eyes still wide open, the woman died with her head turned at an unlikely angle.

"I… beg you…"

The man—the doctor—only said this before collapsing once more into the water. Kino quickly ran over and stopped the woman's corpse from falling over.

"…"

And she looked at the girl sleeping on the back of the corpse.

Kino removed the cloth tying the baby to the woman, and lifted her up. The woman's thin corpse fell into the water. Her hair covered her face, concealing her wide open eyes.

Kino placed the child on top of Hermes' carrier.

"I'm not a crib, you know."

Kino ignored Hermes' complaint and gazed at the baby who continued to sleep soundly.

"She's not crying at all. It must be comfortable on top of you, Hermes."

"Well, it doesn't really matter."

The moment Hermes spoke,

"Waaaaaaah!"

The man wailed.

The doctor crouched down on the water,

"Waah! Waaaaaaaaah!"

And fell on his knees, crying.

The man, though well over fifty, cried like a child.

—

The man continued to weep while blood dripped from his mouth.

The sky was already showing signs of the approaching evening when the man's wailing settled down.

Kino looked up and saw the white clouds floating on the pale orange sky. When she looked down at her feet, the same scenery greeted her.

The only difference being the corpses that adorned the water's surface.

"Kino… I have a request…," the doctor mumbled weakly.

"Kill me… Kill me now…"

Kino answered rather angrily, "Didn't you hear what I said before?"

Then she asked,

"You can drive a truck, right?"

* * *

Until his death, my grandpa was telling me this:

"Life is a battle."

"Do not be afraid to fight."

As to my country of birth, and about my mother…

In the end, he wasn't able to tell me anything about them. It's not like I can do anything even if I find out, so it really doesn't matter.

Every time I asked, he would only tell me why I was named 'Kino'.

'Kino' is the name of a traveler. It was the name of the person who fought to protect me and my grandfather back when he was wandering, carrying me in his arms as a baby.

I never learned about anything else other than the ‘ very kind and very strong person traveling on a motorrad’. That’s because grandfather would talk about nothing but ‘Kino’.

This Kino fended off our attackers and protected us. She fought for our sake.

“That the two of us are living safe and sound like this, is all thanks to Kino.”

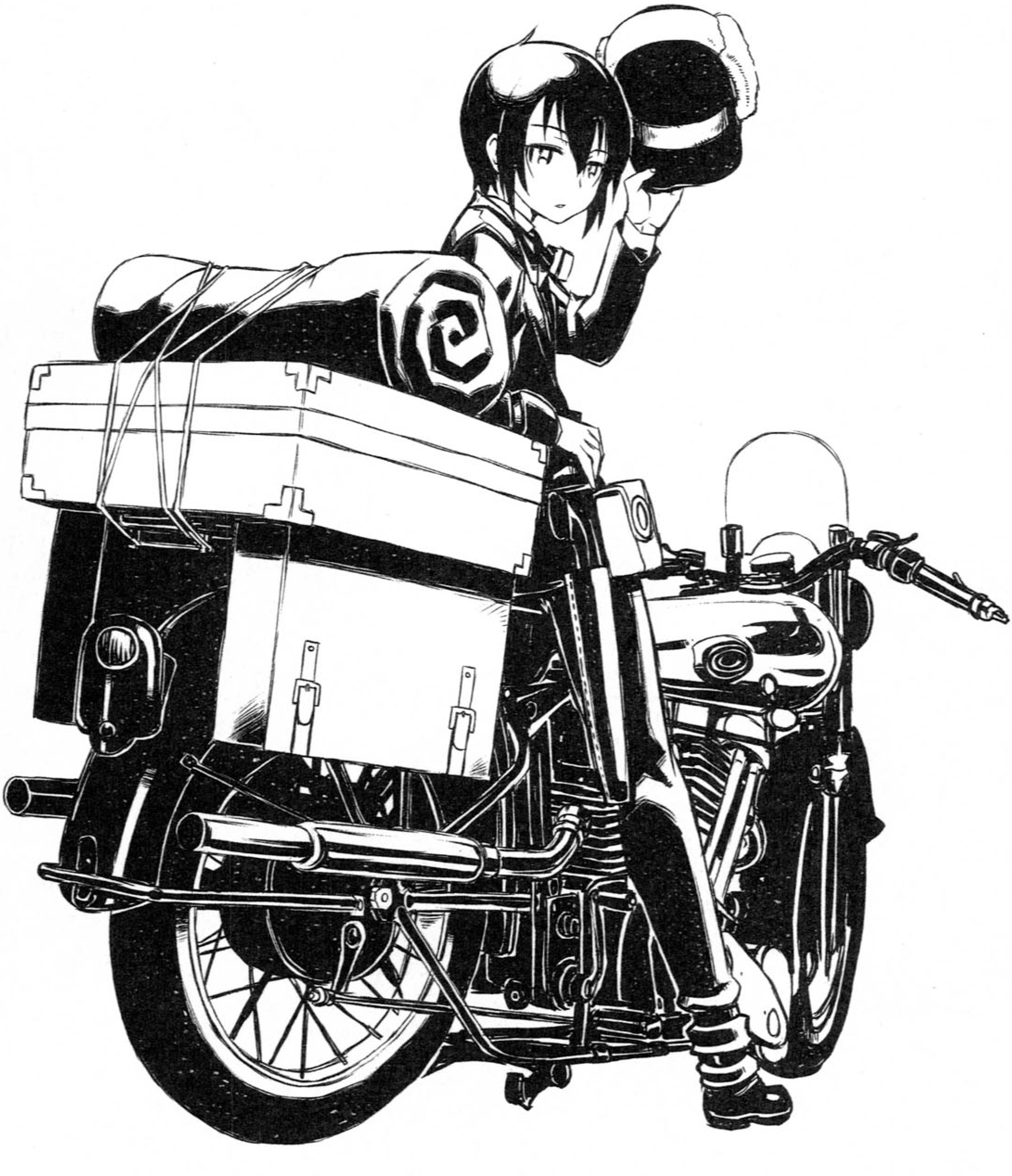
My grandfather was saying those words to me up to the moment of his death.

I wonder where that traveler is and what she’s doing right now.

Maybe she’s still on her journey.

Maybe, she’s fighting again for someone’s sake.

Or perhaps—



“The Camera Country, Part A” —Picturesque A—

The country Kino and Hermes entered had not any technological progress, but one that carried on a very simple lifestyle since the days of yore.

In the walls made of stone, the people never changed despite the centuries, maintaining their incredible self-sufficiency for that same length of time.

Their clothing were all of natural fibers like hemp and silk, their food organic grains and vegetables, and surprisingly, the country actually led a rather wealthy but peaceful life.

Having not seen visitors (vehicles, actually) in a long time, Kino and Hermes were welcomed warmly. Treated to their meals, Kino was impressed by the taste, cleaning the plate every day.

A relaxing three days passed, and it was on this morning, when Kino and Hermes were about to be sent off by all of the country’s people.

“Kino and Hermes. Would you be willing to do us a favor?”

This was spoken by a resident, who came with a camera in hand.

It was a black camera. Single-lens reflex with interchangeable lenses, which used 35 mm film, as Kino often saw sold within metallic tubes in other countries she visited.

It was fitted with the standard 50mm manual focus lens, with a cloth strap attached that enabled a person to hang the camera from the neck.

Scrapes covered it here and there, but there was no significant damage and the camera was in perfectly useable condition.

“…?”

Kino cocked her head. Seeing that none of the other residents were surprised, Hermes made the inquiry.

“That’s a nice model. What’s up with it?”

"This, you see…"

The one who held the camera explained the story.

Over a decade ago, a traveler made his way here. A young man in his twenties, he suffered fatal wounds on his journey, which caused him to fall seriously ill.

In spite of the country's best efforts, they were in vain and the man was due to pass in several days. It was then that—

"It's my most valuable treasure… Here's my thanks… I give it to everyone… Thank you…"

—he handed this device to the residents as his gratitude.

"Even now, it's our country's most prized possession. We take turns handling and maintaining it. Its name is No More Film."

"Pardon me?"

"That's what it's called?"

To the surprised Kino and Hermes,

“Yes. That was the last thing the man said.”

“…ahh, I see.”

“Hm, so that’s how it is. So, how do you use it?”

“Ah, yes. We didn’t know how to use it at first, but everyone put their heads together and after some inquiry into the matter, we confirmed it. First, you turn the round end to someone. Then, he or she shows up as a picture in this little window to the person who’s holding this. When you turn this tube, you can make the picture clearer. It’s a surprising mechanism.”

“I see.” “Go on.”

“On the right side, you push this lever out. When you let go, it snaps back. Then it allows you to press this bump here just once. May I?”

“Go ahead.” “A-okay.”

Granted permission, the cameraman closed his left eye , looked at Kino and Hermes with his right through the finder, and then pressed the shutter.

Ka-shunk.

A leisurely metallic sound was audible.

“Just now, when I pressed on this bump, you two disappeared for a moment. In that instant—”

The cameraman continued happily,

“I was able to preserve your image in my mind. Thank you very much.”

“?” “Hm?”

“See, this mechanism allows the picture to be stored in my head. From my right eye to my head, the image of you two comes in and properly puts itself in storage. This way, I’ll always be able to remember now as a wonderful memory. So that’s why it disappears for that instant.”

“Ahh…I see.”

So said Kino, waiting for his next words.

“With that, may you allow all of us a chance to use this device to remember you?”

Kino smiled and nodded.

“Of course. May everyone get in the picture, too?”

And then—

Translator Notes and References

1. ↑ Hermes says *‘seiken no hekieki’* (fed up with the government) instead of *‘seiten no hekireki’* (bolt out of the blue).
2. ↑ Of course, this should be 'truth is stranger than fiction'.